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THE IDES OF MARCH.

VOL II.

THE IDES OF MARCH

BY

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'THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE,' 'A FALSE POSITION,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE IDES OF MARCH.

CHAPTER I.

THE MERRION FAMILY.

Where children are not, heaven is not, and heaven if they
come not again shall be never :

But the face and the voice of a child are assurance of
heaven and its promise for ever !

A. C. SWINBURNE.

WITH a plaintiveness born only of summer
night and summer sea, the band at the
end of the pier was sobbing out the dying
notes of a waltz. The sound floated in,
lazily, like the scarcely-stirred air, through
the windows of one of the large houses on
the esplanade.

The occupants of the house had just done dining; they were at dessert.

The host leaned back in his chair and tasted his wine; his wife rested her round white arms on the table-cloth, and tried, not very successfully, to peel some early walnuts; their guest sat in a reverie, absently fingering the stem of his wine-glass.

Outside, there sounded distinctly the patter of hurrying feet on the asphalté parade; laughter and voices also were tossed in at the window in snatches; the low murmur of the sea was soothingly audible. A silence had fallen on the trio.

The band stopped.

Frederic Merrion, the host, looked up.

‘Will you come out on the pier, Bertha?’ he said.

‘I am not sure; I feel lazy, it is too hot,’ she replied; ‘you and Mr. Greville

‘I had better take your cigars. I’ll try the sofa and a novel. Is that a good prescription, Mr. Greville?’

‘My dear Mrs. Merrion, that entirely depends on whose novel,’ said her visitor, removing his double eye-glass.

‘Oh, I’m not cultured,’ said she calmly, leaning back in her chair so as fully to show the beautiful curves of her figure. ‘I like an entertaining story, I hate all that uncomfortable stuff that Hope reads. You and she would agree admirably.’

Gilbert Greville did not reply at once. His hesitation was owing to a strange mixture of feeling. To the name just mentioned he had been laboriously trying to steer the talk all dinner-time. He had met Mr. and Mrs. Merrion just outside his hotel that afternoon, and had accepted their invitation to dinner solely in hopes of hearing that name. He had been forced to wait until dessert to hear it introduced;

now he wanted to prevent the conversation from glancing off, and yet not to show his own anxiety.

‘Are you accusing me of a partiality for uncomfortable stuff, Mrs. Merrion?’ he said, after a minute.

‘You know what I mean—George Meredith, and so on,’ she said, vaguely.

‘Miss Merrion reads George Meredith?’—interrogatively.

‘I have heard you talk to her about it,’ she replied, decisively.

‘Last year,’ he said, and was silent.

His mind was back in last year—last summer, when he had joined Hope and her brother and his wife in Switzerland. He was remembering the way that life had seemed to enlarge for him after Hope’s appearance in it. He had made a great many resolutions since then. He would write a book, enter Parliament, raise the masses, do something to make his name

honoured and respected. None of these resolutions had been kept. He began to think they never would be, unless Hope herself came personally to assist.

‘We are starting for Switzerland next week, as I think I told you,’ said Bertha, breaking into his meditations. ‘We send the children, nurses and governesses, to Dalby Sands.’

‘Does Miss Merrion join you?’ asked Greville, hoping that his tone was natural.

‘I wish she would,’ said Hope’s brother; ‘but when once she is in Norshire, with those crazy friends of hers, there is no catching her again. They all seem to go mad together.’

‘Is she there now?’

The guest was examining his spoon so narrowly as to make Mrs. Merrion glad she had brought her own plate down with her.

‘Yes, she is in some unheard-of spot in

the middle of the moors, staying at a shooting-box with a detachment of the Saxon house-party. I have written to her to come with us, but I have not the least idea that my entreaties will be effectual.'

'Hope is more eccentric than ever,' said Bertha, absently, 'since the breaking of her engagement to Edgar Disney.'

Greville's heart gave a thump, and a slight shock passed through him. He had never heard of Miss Merrion's brief engagement. Surprise and relief were almost simultaneous, but he thought it wisest not to expose all his ignorance.

'Oh, is that broken off?' he said, composedly.

'Yes. Her doing. A pity, I thought, as my brother, Captain Merrion, considers him a thoroughly nice fellow,' said Frederic.

Bertha laughed lazily.

'I suppose Hope thinks she may pick

and choose, with her fortune,' she remarked.

'I think Miss Merrion would be certain of admiration, without her fortune,' was Greville's opinion.

A shadow came over his host's face, and he shrugged his shoulders.

'Nobody will have a fortune in a short time, if things go on as at present,' he said, snappishly. 'Nothing which pays more than two-and-a-half seems safe now-a-days.'

'Frederic has been terribly mean lately,' said his wife, tranquilly. 'I find it so hard to get money out of him; he says the rate of interest is so low.'

'Hard times, no doubt,' said Greville, with the amused indifference of a man who has never known the want of money, and thinks such complaints a mild kind of joke.

Certainly Mrs. Frederic Merrion had

not a poverty-stricken aspect. She looked very sumptuous altogether, as she sat at the head of her table, the soft radiance of clustered wax-lights falling upon her.

‘Hope does not spend a tenth of her income, of course,’ she said.

‘All the better for her, later on,’ said her husband, sharply. ‘I cannot think why you should make it your business to urge her to spend more.’

‘Gracious, Fred! I don’t!’ she replied, in very great astonishment at his unaccustomed tone.

The pause which followed was interrupted by the entrance of a quiet ladylike girl in spectacles, who wore morning dress. She seemed a little out-of-place in the gilded drawing-room of the showy house which the Merrions had taken furnished for the season.

‘Come in, Miss Thorpe,’ said Mrs. Merri-
on, ‘and have some fruit;’ but she cast

a reproving glance from the plain, blue-serge dress to the visitor.

‘I am sorry, I must not wait,’ said Miss Thorpe, in a gentle voice, coming up to the lady where she sat. ‘I came to ask you to come upstairs and look at Guy, if you have time before you go out, for he seems quite poorly.’

A look of annoyance passed over Mrs. Merrion’s handsome face.

‘It would have been better to wait,’ she said, coolly. ‘I am coming upstairs directly.’

Without saying more, the young governess went out of the room as quietly as she had entered it.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Fred, to whose ear the soft tones had not penetrated.

‘Guy has over-eaten himself again, apparently. It is astonishing how greedy that boy is; but there was scarcely any need to come and announce it publicly.’

Miss Thorpe is prone to make too much fuss about the children.'

'A good fault, isn't it?' said Greville.

'Yes, she is exceedingly trustworthy,' said his host, with decision. 'Otherwise, I should not consent to this going away and leaving the children in her charge at Dalby Sands.'

'Children are always better and happier in charge of their nurses and governesses than with their parents,' asserted Mrs. Merrion, calmly; 'they are so much less indulged. Guy is always seedy when away with us, because Fred will allow him to sit up so late and give him such unwholesome food.'

The guest was too profoundly ignorant, perhaps also too indifferent on the subject of education, to question this assertion. He finished his coffee with a sense of having been very much bored by the conversation all dinner-time, except the few

remarks which related to Hope, and which had most certainly afforded him food for reflection. He decided to go out upon the pier with Mr. Merrion, hoping to find it easier to extract some information from the husband when relieved from the presence of the handsome, vapid wife, who demanded so much attention.

Accordingly, the two gentlemen sallied forth together into the starry night, among the strolling throngs of people, and so to the pier, where still the sad notes of the German waltz were borne upon the brine-laden air.

Greville was in a mood to-night to like stars and breaking waves, and sentimental band music. His thoughts were with Hope—this strange Hope who preferred scrambling about in Norshire to all the elegance of a tour on the continent and the best hotels!

She had been engaged, and had broken

her engagement. Was it just dimly, wildly possible that the thought of him, Gilbert Greville, remained with her and had influenced her? The sweetness of such a train of thought was dangerous. He turned to his silent companion and began to question him, easily leading round the conversation into the direction he desired.

Fred Merrion was only too glad to talk of his sister to Greville. He wished Hope to marry, and to marry well. Greville was a thoroughly nice fellow, and a rich fellow into the bargain. Hope's brother was as communicative as her lover could wish.

‘Molyneux Lyster!’ cried Greville, with a start, ‘why, I know him. That is, he is a relation of my family: but I thought his wife's loss had turned his brain, and that he received no visitors. A shooting-party there! Very good moor, too, so I hear. I have a great mind to invite myself.’

‘Well, I don’t know that I should advise your doing that,’ said Fred, doubtfully. ‘You see, he does not receive visitors, except these young Saxons; you might not be welcome. Better come on the continent with my sister, my wife, and me.’

The prudent brother was by no means sure that what he called the ‘hoyden element’ in Hope would be approved by the well-bred Greville. He, himself, would have found none of his sympathies appealed to had he met Hope after her mushrooming expedition at Hesselburgh, for instance. Bertha never wanted to do anything in the least unconventional: it would be better for Hope to be under her chaperonage when wooed by so eligible a suitor, not running wild in her old clothes, heated with tennis, muddy with exercise, or torn with climbing.

There were two Hope Merrions; the attractive heiress, who dressed irreproach-

ably and kept her lovers at a distance, and the Hope beloved of Tom, who never stood upon her dignity.

To the first of these only had Greville been introduced ; whether he suspected the existence of the latter, was a problem too hard for Fred to solve.

‘ But *is* Miss Merrion coming to Switzerland with you ? ’ said the enquirer, persistently.

‘ I have written to tell her she ought. ’

‘ Ah ! will that prove an inducement, do you expect ? ’

Fred laughed.

‘ It may ; she is a very good girl at heart, though she is a little self-willed, but she was left an orphan so young. ’

Greville said little more. He had learned all that he was likely to learn from two people so little fitted to understand Hope’s aims or motives.

He said good-night soon, and sauntered

back to his hotel, his thoughts lulled by the soothing murmur of the waves.

‘If I want to go and stay there,’ he said to himself, as he turned on the threshold for a last look at the night, ‘the best thing I can do is to go without an invitation.’

Meanwhile, Bertha had slowly transported herself to the upper regions of the large house on the esplanade. She looked into the school-room, but it was empty. The lamp burned beside Miss Thorpe’s vacant chair and full work-basket. The stout and languid beauty moved on into the boy’s bed-room. Here, in the darkest corner, Wilf was asleep, his curly head burrowed down among the sheets, his body twisted like a corkscrew. Opposite, a candle had been placed on the corner of the mantelpiece, and, by its light, the governess sat at Guy’s bedside, busy repairing some damage to the limbs of Adela’s doll.

Guy himself lay on his back, with patiently wide-awake eyes, his arms raised over his head, and his gaze fixed upon the fantastic shadows cast by said arms upon the ceiling.

The apparition of Mrs. Merrion, in full evening toilette in the night nursery, was so unusual that the child started up in bed.

‘My stars ! There’s inamma !’ he cried.

‘Lie down, Guy dear,’ said his governess, gently.

‘Well, there does not seem to me to be much the matter with him, he is lively enough,’ said Bertha, standing by the bed.

‘He is feverish,’ said Miss Thorpe, a trifle indignantly.

His mother took his hand in one of hers.

‘Feverish ! Not very,’ she remarked, carelessly.

‘Mamma,’ said Guy, twisting over upon his elbow, ‘how old do you suppose Brian de Bois Guilbert was?’

‘Bless me, Guy, don’t be so idiotic! What have you been eating to-day?’

‘He has had very simple food all day; I took good care of that,’ said Miss Thorpe. ‘But, after tea, he seemed so excited, I put him to bed.’

‘It was humbug, I didn’t want to go,’ sighed the patient, restlessly. ‘I shouldn’t have gone if I hadn’t been a Templar.’

‘What did you eat yesterday?’ demanded his mother, not to be deterred by any attempt to force the conversation into other channels.

‘Oh, I don’t know; Wilf and me bought some bulls-eyes. I say, mamma, how much did your necklace cost? Did papa give it you?’

‘You know he did. I think, Miss Thorpe——’

‘Well, didn’t he tell you how much it cost? Was it as much as a thousand pounds? Do tell me, mamma.’

‘Be quiet, Guy; you will waken Wilf.’

‘Well, he’s not asleep really, he’s only foxing. But I do wish you’d tell me if Brian de Bois Guilbert was older than Ivanhoe. Because Wilf is such a young idiot, he says he wasn’t; and as we are Templars——’

‘Have you given him anything to throw him into a perspiration?’ asked Mrs. Merrion of her governess.

‘Yes, some sweet spirits of nitre.’

‘Is Aunt Hope’s necklace more *valubler* than yours, mamma?’

‘No, Guy, certainly not.’

‘Well, couldn’t you lend yours to Adela when we play at Torquilstone, because she is Rowena? Miss Thorpe is Rebecca, ’cause she’s dark, and we’ve got a beautiful handkerchief for her head that Theresa’s

brother in the Marines brought from Madras. Oh, I say, mamma, I am so *beastly* hot! I really *can't* get to sleep!

'You will go to sleep directly if I take away the light and Miss Thorpe,' replied his mother, authoritatively. 'Lie down now, and let us have no more nonsense. I expect you to be asleep in ten minutes. Good-night!'

'Oh, I say, mamma, don't leave me in the dark. My head is so full of thoughts to-night, I know I shall stay awake. If you will leave Miss Thorpe, I will promise, honour bright, to go to sleep—at least, I won't say one more word.'

'Do you know that it's past ten o'clock, Guy? Be reasonable. If we go away, you will be asleep in a moment.'

'That's all you know about it. I shall wake up Wilf and talk to him if you leave me alone.'

'If you do, I shall report you to your

father,' said his mother, severely, as she took up the light.

Guy burst into tears, rolling his flushed face over into the pillows to hide such disgrace.

'You *are* unkind,' he sobbed.

'Don't you see he is unwell?' said Miss Thorpe, in an agitated whisper to Mrs. Merrion. 'He is much too manly to cry unless he felt ill.'

'Rubbish! He is spoilt!' was the somewhat angry answer. 'You really make too much fuss of him, Miss Thorpe.'

She carried away the candle, and Miss Thorpe followed her into the passage.

'I think Guy ought to see a doctor,' said the girl, in a low voice, but firmly. 'He is very far from well.'

'Do you think he is sickening for something? Oh, nonsense,' said Bertha, yawning. 'He is always pretending to be ill. He is such a cunning child. Keep him on

plain food to-morrow, and he will be all right. He is the sort of boy it is fatal to make a fuss with.'

'I assure you, Mrs. Merrion, he is not pretending——'

'My dear Miss Thorpe, when I think the doctor necessary, I will send for him.'

She walked off, her silken robes rustling down the staircase, and Mabel Thorpe looked after her, with an expression in her eyes very like contempt.

'And you are a mother!' she murmured to herself, with a shrug of her thin shoulders.

A stifled sob from the bed-room smote her ear. She crept in, knelt down by the bed, took the slight form of the boy in her arms, and softly kissed his wet face.

'Oh, you will stay here, won't you?' pleaded the Templar.

‘My brave boy knows I can’t, if mamma says no. Now, you are going to show what a good Knight Templar you are, by obeying an order you don’t like.’

‘Mamma isn’t the Grand Master; you are.’

‘Yes, and I tell you to be brave, and to obey. I know you will. I will give you a drink of this milk and soda, and then you will go off to sleep.’

‘Darling Miss Thorpe, you and Aunt Hope are the two nicest people in the world. I wish Aunt Hope was here!’

‘So do I,’ thought Mabel, with a sigh, ‘for I know he ought to see a doctor.’

CHAPTER II.

FORLORN HOPE.

God's in His heaven !
All's right with the world !

R. BROWNING.

THE sunniest peace brooded over the old fruit-garden at Leaming-le-Moor—the Pleasaunce, as they called it.

Its mellow red walls seemed to radiate heat and to smell of sunshine, as Leo Forde remarked.

Over the tops of them could be seen the boughs of the orchard, heavy with ripening fruit. This part of the garden had been Muriel's idea of perfect bliss ever

since she could remember. It was separated from the flower-garden and tennis-lawns by an intricate labyrinth of shabby, painted doors in high walls, by a profusion of hot-houses, an untidy accumulation of green-houses, and a wilderness of strawberry-beds, peas, scarlet-runners, celery-trenches, and potatoes.

The particular piece of ground in question was open to every sunbeam, sheltered from every unkind blast. It was carpeted with immemorial turf, mossy and golden. From the great shady lime in the corner still hung the old swing, put up in nursery days for Tom and his sister. There was the summer-house where they had consumed so many strawberries of their own gathering ; there the fruit-trees which they had planted, the borders which they had cultivated with wooden spades. It had been an outdoor nursery for them.

The air was sweet with scents of the old-

fashioned flowers which bloomed around—the monthly roses on the summer-house, the wall-flowers, mignonette, southern-wood, and sweet-briar, and, along the sunniest wall, the bed of violets which, except in the depth of winter, was scarcely ever searched in vain. From the only side of this charmed spot where the outer world was not excluded by red walls was to be seen the loveliest view attainable in the neighbourhood. The village rose upon a tolerably steep hill, and at the top, picturesquely set off by clumps of trees, the steeple of the church soared into misty air. Farther off, the purple moors rolled into the distance, and melted into the purple horizon.

Muriel was taking advantage of this glorious spell of weather to sketch her impression of this scene in water-colours. Leo, with less ability, but more zeal, was laboriously following her example. Hope,

who could not sketch at all, was curled up on the turf, half-shaded by a red umbrella, deep in a very delightful novel, and almost oblivious of their surroundings.

The three graces, as Mollie had named them, were left to their own devices for the day, it being impossible for them to take lunch to the sportsmen, as the cart was gone to the station, twelve miles distant, to fetch Richard Forde, and the carriage-horses were on loan to the vicar and his wife, to enable them to spend a day in the town. The girls were, if anything, rather pleased with a few hours' quiet, so rife with picnics and junkettings had the last few days been.

Nothing could be more idyllic than life at Leaming. The glorious free air of the moorland seemed to act upon them all like a charm. Evelyn Westmorland had apparently laid aside his moroseness ; he was no longer monosyllabic and chilling. Whe-

ther it really was the air, or whether the little adventure of the *tableaux vivants* had broken down some barrier, or whether the absence of his father released him from a strain, or whether his newly-formed resolution towards matrimony had softened him—who shall say?

The result was evident, whatever the cause. When Mr. Lyster invited Leo to join the party to the moors, Evelyn had resolved to go too, and had been so strangely gentle and obliging, that several times Tom had remarked to Hope that he was really afraid something was wrong with the old Major. Hope had little share in the change. They were able to pair off more freely at Leaming than had been possible at Hesselburgh, and Evelyn was always Leo's cavalier, while Hope and Tom were together as of yore.

Leo took considerable pleasure in this arrangement—firstly, because she was very

young, and felt all the importance of being noticed by Major Westmorland; secondly, because, when at first he had so pointedly neglected her, she had determined to make him notice her, and so enjoyed her triumph; thirdly, because it was great fun to hear this silent person laugh, as he was most prone to do, at her nonsense; and, lastly, with a lurking thought in her mind of Mr. Sayers Hancock and the Norchester tea-parties. How far away they all seemed now! No wonder that poor Leo's head was a trifle turned—that she was almost out of her depth. Her promotion had been so very rapid.

Mr. Saxon had sent them all to Leamington on his drag, and when that drag had dashed down Minstergate in the morning sunshine, Tom Saxon holding the reins, with Miss Merrion at his side, Mr. Lyster beaming, with Miss Saxon behind, and a place reserved for her by the Major, it was

impossible to avoid feeling somewhat, however little, '*tête montée*.'

Life's realities had ceased to exist for her, just now. She was living in a dream.

Her excitement made her restless. Before very long, her brush was thrown down on the mossy turf at her feet, and she was stretching out her graceful young limbs with a sigh of weariness.

'What is the use of trying?' she said, despondingly. 'I can't do it as you can, Muriel!' for the three girls now used each other's Christian names. 'How pretty that is! Your spire stands out so well!'

'So would yours, if you sponged your sky a little.'

'It is all dry,' said Leo, with an impatient shake, 'as dry as the dean's sermons!'

Hope, from her nest in the turf, laughed faintly, and looked up.

'Take a lesson from Muriel,' said she,

contemplating that young lady's industry.

‘Patience on a monument!’

‘It is always a work of much difficulty,’ remarked Muriel, peaceably, ‘to induce me to begin anything, but when I do begin, I always finish, if I can.’

Hope sat up, and clasped her hands round her knees.

‘An excellent maxim,’ said she. ‘Now, I am all beginnings and no endings. But that is a profitless theme for discussion. What now, Leo?’

Leo was collecting her painting materials, with the somewhat inefficient aid of Prim, a nervous fox terrier, who always felt himself expected to take a very prominent part in whatever might be going forward.

‘I think I shall go and practise on the organ at church for an hour,’ said she.

‘Will Billy be there to blow?’

‘I told him yesterday that I should very likely be coming this afternoon.’

‘Suppose I come, in case he shouldn’t turn up?’

‘It would be very kind of you,’ said Leo, gratefully.

‘I should like a walk,’ said Hope, closing her book. ‘My hero and heroine have started on their wedding journey, and become utterly uninteresting. It is extraordinary how wild my interest becomes just before the climax, and how completely it collapses afterwards!’

‘So does mine,’ agreed Leo. ‘But, if you and I start off, we shall leave Muriel alone.’

‘I am more than content, thank you. I shall go steadily on at this, as long as the light lasts. In fact, I shall be rather glad to be rid of you both. Be off!’

After a little more delay, they presently started. No change in their costume was necessary; to meet a stranger in the dusty winding lane that led past the church to

the moor would have been almost as astonishing as to encounter one rambling in the walled Pleasaunce. Leaming was as solitary as it was sunny and sleepy.

‘Is it not pleasant,’ said Hope, dreamily, ‘to be here? Such rest—such ease! Nobody here is pretending to be richer, or cleverer, or nobler than they really are; there is no bustle, no struggle to keep pace with the times, or with one’s social rival in the next street. It is such peace!’

‘If you will not mind my saying so,’ said Leo, in her frank way, ‘it seems rather surprising, somehow, to hear you speak of peace and rest as you do. I don’t feel as if I quite sympathized. I like life and action, plenty of it. I was brought up at Sandwater—such a dull place! Everything seemed to *creep* along, and I hated it! What you call rest sounds to me like stagnation.’

‘I daresay you are right, Leo,’ answered

Hope, after a minute's reflection. 'I believe it is an affectation on my part to talk so. I dislike stagnation as much as you do. But I suppose there are times in one's life when one is glad to rest, when one grows weary !'

'I like this nice sleepy place, very much,' continued Leo, 'I feel the charm of it. But, when I come to question myself honestly, I know quite well that it is the people, this nice house-party, which makes up the charm for me. If I were here all alone, or with Mrs. Hancock, for instance, I know I should be very—oh, extremely dull, however purple the moors might be.'

'To question yourself honestly!' repeated Hope, following up her own train of thought. 'I have often done, or tried to do that, but have I ever given myself an honest answer? I think that is the difficulty!'

She spoke more to herself than to the

girl beside her ; and the latter neither understood nor replied.

‘I think I have been spoilt, all my life, Leo,’ resumed Hope, after a little silence, ‘for, do you know, I never knew till lately what it is like to feel so totally, deeply dissatisfied with myself.’

‘Ought one to feel so?’ asked Leo, wonderingly.

‘I don’t know. If you know yourself thoroughly, I suppose yourself ought never to come upon you as a surprise,’ was Hope’s somewhat involved theory. ‘But I think I have never known myself at all, or thought of life as I ought to think of it. I should like to be of use to somebody before I die.’

‘I should think,’ timidly suggested Leo, ‘that, if you go wrong at all, it is by thinking too much, and not too little.’

Hope laughed out merrily and suddenly.

‘I am a goose,’ said she ; ‘thank you

for stopping me, you charitable person ! If there is one characteristic that I despise more than another, it is a tendency to bewail one's own deficiencies aloud. And really,' she concluded, panting a little with the steepness of the ascent, 'if we ever reach the top of this hill, we shall have nothing left to wish for.'

They went on in silence for a time, all their energies needed by the climb.

Once they stopped for a rest, and leaned over a gateway gazing into a clover-field.

A lark shot up, almost from their feet, sailed aloft into the radiant air, and sang as English larks will sing, 'for joy o' the summer sun.'

'How different this side of the hill is from the other !' said Hope. 'This warm, cultivated south slope, and just over the brow is the frowning, treacherous, desolate moor !'

'How dreadful it looked the other day,

with that rainstorm driving over it,' chimed in Leo. 'It was so strange to stand, as we did, in a gleam of sunshine, and watch the black clouds burst upon the heath in torrents.'

'It was like my life,' asserted Hope, who was evidently not to be withheld from moralising to-day, even with the strongest resolution to the contrary. 'I stand smiling in the sunshine, and thinking that all the world is enjoying it too. But it is only just a gleam, just a gleam that shines on a few of us. That!' with a dramatic gesture of her expressive hand, 'that is the world! that dark, lonely, tempestuous moor, where the clouds hang so low that they hide each other's faces from us! Oh, that moor! It is terrible! I don't want to think of it!'

She hid her face.

Leo was very much mystified. Her idea of Hope, so far, had been that she was

gayest of the gay: Tom's willing co-adjutor in any nonsense that might be suggested. To understand was impossible, but to sympathize came most naturally to her quick feelings. She bent towards her companion, put her arm round her waist, and kissed her softly.

‘ You dear little thing,’ said Hope, impulsively. ‘ I do hope you will be happy. You, at least, have nothing to regret ! But I have ! I made a terrible mistake once. I thought it was over and done with, and that I had, so to speak, put everything to rights again, and freed myself. But, do you know, Leo, I seem not to be able to get rid of it. Something is always happening, quite unexpectedly, to bring it all back so vividly ; it was so at Hesselburgh, it is so again, here. I was the cause of a great wrong being done, the most unintentional cause, but still the cause. Sometimes I feel as if the weight was too heavy to

bear, because—because that wrong can never be righted now. Never, never ! It is too late !’ She was sobbing as she spoke. ‘Think what it would be, Leo, to stand up for awhile in the sunshine, and hope and believe that it would last : and then to have to wander away far out into that bleak moor, into cold, poisonous fens and lonely valleys of rocks, in darkness, misery, and clouds. Into the land not inhabited, the desert, the awful loneliness ; to be *quite* alone, and for no one to understand. And to die there, silent and unknown, with nobody to hear your bitter cry. Can you imagine anything more terrible ?’

There was a little silence, and then Leo said, very shyly,

‘That was what Christ suffered, was it not ?’ and then, receiving no answer, went on, hesitatingly, ‘I remember hearing my uncle say, in one of his sermons, that it

was the awful loneliness which made the worst part of the human agony of Jesus.—
“*I have trodden the wine-press alone, and of the people there was none with Me.*”—You see, nobody could possibly sympathize with Him, because nobody else knew what sin was, or could know it——’

‘Go on,’ said Hope, feverishly, as the young voice faltered.

‘—And my uncle said,’ slowly proceeded Leo, thus encouraged, ‘that it is that very loneliness which He endured that makes Him so able to sympathize with us; and you know, Hope, it goes on in that same chapter to say: “*So He was their Saviour: in all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them.*”’

‘What chapter is it?’ asked Hope, in a subdued voice.

‘The sixty-third of Isaiah. I remember that sermon so well, because the text was an odd one; and you quoted it just now, “A

land not inhabited." About the poor scapegoat, you know.'

'The scapegoat!'

'Yes; you remember they sent it away alone into the desert.'

'I remember,' said Hope, resting her elbows on the gate, and her chin in her hands. 'I never thought of it like that before. Is your uncle a very good man?'

'Yes, he is. He said, too, that loneliness is, if you come to think of it, the worst of all sorrows: and moral loneliness worse than bodily.'

'I wish I had heard the sermon,' said Hope.

'I can't repeat it at all well,' said Leo, humbly, 'and I think there was a great deal of it which I did not take in, because, you see, I have never had many troubles of my own. But I know he said that Christ died that no human soul might ever be left alone again: and so they

called Him Emmanuel—"God with us."

The solemn young voice died away in the calm of the golden afternoon. Exhausted with his own rapture, the lark dropped down to his meadow nest, and his song was hushed. So still was everything, that the girls could hear the baby breeze that whispered in the hedgerows.

'God with us,' repeated Hope. 'How strange it is that one may hear some texts for years and years, and never find any particular meaning in them; then it comes to you all of a sudden. Leo, you have done me good.'

'I am so glad,' said Leo, warmly. 'I was so afraid you would think it unnatural, or canting, to quote a text.'

'I shouldn't like it if you were always doing it, it would lose its effect,' said Hope, smiling, though her lashes were wet; 'but you knew the right time to say it; and, oh! Leo,' lifting her eyes to the

blue depths above, 'God does seem very near just now.'

Both girls were silent, and perhaps some imperfect, faltering petition went up through the peaceful air from their hearts to the Infinite Love which brooded over them.

When they resumed their road, no word was spoken to break the holy spell, until they stood on the hill-top by the little grey lych-gate of the old Norman church.

CHAPTER III.

A L O N E L Y G R A V E.

Strew on her roses—roses,
With never a spray of yew.
In quiet she reposes,
Ah ! would that I did too !

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

HERE Prim, who had accompanied them on their walk, ran forward, with delighted yelpings, and, as they lifted the latch, darted into the chuchyard, and could be heard giving a vociferous welcome to some friend hidden by the angle of the church wall.

A moment more, and Major Westmorland came into view, walking towards them

bareheaded in the sunshine that flooded the summit of the hill.

Hope's first feeling was of vexation ; her eyelids were red. Her next, of consolation ; red or green, the Major would never notice them.

Evelyn looked very handsome and erect and manly as he met them.

'How did you get here?' cried Leo, shaking off her solemnity as lightly as she might have done a drop of rain. 'Have you not been shooting?'

'Yes—until an hour ago, then I remembered that you were to be practising this afternoon, and I thought I would be in readiness in case your blower failed.'

'How very kind!' cried the girl, with a fine blush. 'But did Billy not come?'

'He is not here,' returned the Major, looking round him with a guilty air which convinced Hope that Billy had duly attended, and been bribed to make himself scarce.

The thought caused her a strange consternation. Several ideas rushed across her mind almost simultaneously. The Major was in love with Leo. It had before been obvious that he admired her, and sought her society, but in some vague way she felt that this last move looked like business. Evelyn's determined face was more determined than usual. Then, if these things were so, she, Hope, was most lamentably *de trop*. For a moment she felt undecided.

'Hope was so very kind as to come with me in case Billy was not forthcoming,' said Leo, as they strolled up the path.

'It is scarcely lady's work,' said the Major.

'I gladly resign my task to abler hands,' said Hope, with a gaiety she could not quite feel. 'I shall stroll home again, I think.'

'Oh, Hope! then you will have had all this hot walk for nothing.'

‘Oh, no, Leo! not for nothing,’ was the answer, with a sweet smile which was considerably tinged with the shadow of their late solemnity. ‘Indeed, I have liked it—it has done me good.’

They stood by the porch, the three of them. On the worn stone bench within lay the Major’s cap and gun. Through the closed wire doors the colours of the east window showed in subdued tones. Had the Major not been there, Hope would have liked to go and kneel in the dusky coolness, and ease her present sense of inadequacy and failure. It was a new thing in her, this humility, this longing to pray. As it was, she had to smile, and nod, and say lightly,

‘I will say good-bye now. I suppose you will both be back in time for dinner.’

‘I will take care of her,’ said Evelyn, with a downward glance at the white-robed Leo.

‘I shall take a few minutes’ rest before starting,’ went on Hope, her eyes turning involuntarily to the unbroken purple sweep of moor lying now at her feet. ‘Go in and play, Leo. I will stay outside and listen.’

‘Have you ever tried organ-blowing?’ asked Leo of her tall companion.

He shook his head doubtfully.

‘My experience is not large,’ he smilingly answered. ‘So much I candidly confess.’

‘I will tell you a funny little story,’ said she, leaning against the porch. ‘My uncle at Sandwater had a blower who was blind, and a lady in the parish said to this blind man that she thought it very wonderful that he should never let the wind out, as he could not see the indicator. “Well, you see, miss,” he replied, “I come of a very musical family.”’

The Major’s rare laugh sounded pleasantly.

Hope sat down silently in the porch, and Leo laid upon her lap the bouquet of honeysuckle she had gathered in the hedges.

‘Will you carry it for me?’ she said, ‘they will die before I can put them in water.’

The two entered the church, and Hope heard the little clatter attendant on the opening of the organ, and the seating of the performer.

The organ was a present to the church from Mollie, at Muriel’s instigation, on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday.

Its tone was sweet and mellow, and to-day sounded strangely stirring to Hope. For some minutes she leaned back motionless, the sunshine gilding her loose hair and white dress, and gleaming through the leaves and flowers in her hand. She did not know that, as she so sat, she was visible to the blower standing at his post, nor that

his gaze was fixed upon her, whether he would or not.

‘O rest in the Lord,’ played Leo, with tender sweetness. Hope could fit in the words to the well-known strain, and followed the melody as it flowed on.

‘Commit Thy way unto Him, and trust in Him: and He shall give thee thy heart’s desire—and He shall give thee thy heart’s desire.’

A golden mist swam in her eyes, and blotted out the scene. Hastily she rose, and left the porch, but not the churchyard. With tears, which now she could not repress, she walked on, among the graves, passing indifferently all those on the warm southern slope of the hill, and not pausing till she reached the bleaker northern half of the burying-ground.

Here she dashed away the drops which prevented her from seeing clearly, and looked searchingly around.

The aspect of the moor to-day was gentle, sunny, and beguiling, basking in the broad light of the unclouded sky. Lonely it still was, and must ever be, but there was now a beauty in its very loneliness—a majesty which seemed to consecrate these obscure graves, and lift them up, away from the everyday world into a Sabbath of boundless rest.

A white marble cross caught her eye, and she went straight up to it, cast one look, and knelt beside it.

To the beloved Memory of
NELLIE WETHERELL,
who entered into rest May 1st, 18—,
Aged 23.

Hope almost started when she read the words carved beneath: for they were those which Leo had repeated as they leaned over the gate.

‘In all their affliction, He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them.’

The organ pealed out tenderly yet triumphantly, and it seemed to Hope as if a voice sang in its strains :

‘ And He shall gi—ive thee thy heart’s desire !’

Flinging her arms impulsively about the cross, Hope wept as in all her life she had not wept before.

‘ Oh, Nellie ! Nellie !’ she gasped aloud to the sleeping girl under the turf, ‘ I am glad you are at rest, dear,—I would not call you back. Oh, Nellie, I am so glad God has given you your heart’s desire, and that I need not think of you any more with that look in your eyes, that stricken look that was so terrible to see ! But oh, Nellie, if you could come back just for an instant, and tell him ! Just speak one word to tell him that he misjudges me, and that I did right, as well as I could ! It is so hard—so *hard* to be misjudged ! He is patient and kind to everyone else—only

harsh to me ! Nellie, I can sympathize with you ; I know what you had to bear ! The bitter trouble that ate your heart out and that nobody must know I wonder if you can hear me, in Paradise, and feel for me, now that you are so happy ? Oh, help me, I am so lonely, I feel as if I could not bear it !'

The broken voice died away : only the kneeling girl still clung to the cross, shaking it with the storm of her sobs.

The organ notes sank away softly into silence, and, after a few minutes' pause, there pealed out the 'March of the Silver Trumpets.' Gradually Hope's emotion subsided ; her ebullition of feeling was over, yet she did not move, but after a while she sank down into a sitting position, her head against the marble, and still, as if exhausted.

The chiming of the clock roused her at last, and, taking up Leo's bunch of honey-

suckle, she wove it into a little wreath which she hung upon the cross, and then kissed the letters of the name.

‘ Good-bye, Nellie,’ she whispered.

She was glad she had been there ; it comforted her. She could feel now that this girl’s sufferings had been short, if sharp, and that God had indeed given her her heart’s desire when He laid her to sleep upon the hill-side. And the words carved upon her grave seemed to show that she had rightly understood her trouble, and, going through the vale of misery, had used it for a well.

She walked quietly home in the dusk, the evening wind fanning her hot face and swollen lids, and a strange peace resting upon her soul. She felt and knew that such peace could not last ; she was almost sure that the course of a few days would bring a new pain : the engagement of Major Westmorland to Leo Forde. But,

for to-night, such thoughts were to be done away, and she would remain folded close, as it seemed, in the comforting arms of nature, in the beauty and consecration of the summer sunset.

The wheel-marks on the gravel sweeps of the Manor House gave token that Richard Forde had arrived. In the hall was a group still lingering around the gipsy tea-table. The dogs set up a chorus of welcome as she entered, and, as heads were turned, she saw that there were two new arrivals.

There were Tom and Mollie, dishevelled and fatigued in their shooting gear; the young doctor, fresh and neat in his summer travelling suit, sitting by Muriel and 'engineering the spirit-kettle,' as Tom said; and there was someone else, who rose as she entered, with a look almost of agitation in his usually calm eyes; someone whom she expected to see as little as any-

one on earth at that moment. Mr. Greville, their pleasant travelling companion of last summer.

‘Well,’ she cried, after an astonished little pause, coming forward and laying down her parasol.

‘Did you not expect to see me?’ asked Forde, shaking hands.

‘You? Yes! But——’

‘I must introduce you, Hope my dear; a cousin of mine, who is most kindly and unexpectedly going to give us the pleasure of his company.’

‘There is no need of an introduction, dear Mollie. I know Mr. Greville.’

‘Dear me! Well, to be sure! How small the world is!’ cried Mollie, genially.

‘This makes your visit still more opportune, Greville! Really most pleasant! But quite a coincidence, is it not, to meet in this exceedingly remote spot.’

‘It is exceptionally good fortune for

me,' replied Greville, looking at Hope.

He thought her a little altered since last year: a shade thinner, a shade paler, with less mischief and more soul in her expression. The indescribable charm of her personality was stronger than ever. Her engagement, he imagined, had perhaps caused her some keen pain, or regret; but it had not broken either her heart or her spirit. He thought he had never looked upon so attractive a being.

Hope, meanwhile, was wondering to herself whether or not she was glad to see him; and was quite unable to give herself an answer. She had liked him, last year, well enough to think of him several times after their parting, until the novelty and excitement of her voyage to Ceylon drove him clean out of her happy, thoughtless head.

She had indeed changed, since then; learned to think so much more gravely of

the admiration she had been wont to accept so carelessly and lightly.

‘Nice of you two,’ observed Muriel, placidly, ‘to go off and leave me to make tea for all this multitude! Where is Leo?’

‘I left her playing the organ,’ said Hope, sinking into a chair, and laying down her gloves on a table near; and, after a momentary hesitation, added, ‘Major Westmorland is blowing for her.’

‘Oh!’ said Muriel, with a sudden wide opening of her big blue eyes; and Tom cried, as might have been expected,

‘That was what made the old Major take himself off so early, was it?’

There was a little pause; everybody seemed to be digesting a new idea. Richard Forde rose, and went to the open door to see if the missing couple were in sight.

‘They will be too late for tea,’ remarked Mollie, as he handed Hope hers.

‘This is a magnificent country, Mr. Lyster,’ said Richard, when his survey proved vain.

‘Surprisingly so,’ said Greville, turning to Mollie. ‘Had I had any idea of its beauty, I am afraid I should have burned to make my cousin’s acquaintance long ago.’

‘I am so overjoyed,’ said Mollie, ‘that your first visit should be so opportune. I am terribly dull, except when any young people are with me.’

‘You are certainly not dull now,’ said Greville, with a pleasant smile of much satisfaction at the party of good-looking young people around him.

The spell of Leaming-le-Moor had already fallen on the new-comer. He felt an indescribable happiness and peace stealing over him, as the garden scents reeked in through the purple twilight, the larch-woods hung motionless in the still air, and

Tom and the dogs kept up an undertone of joyous romping on the leopard-skins that carpeted the hall.

‘Come, dear,’ said Muriel, putting her arm through Mollie’s, ‘come and get your button-hole.’

This was a daily function when Muriel was at Leaming; every morning and every evening was the delighted Mollie provided with a fresh flower for his coat. She herself was always obliged to throw away the dead one when presenting the next; nothing would have induced him to discard a blossom of her giving, and the servants said that, when she went away, he always wore the last one until it dropped from his button-hole.

Richard looked longingly at the two, as they passed out of the hall, and Muriel took pity on him.

‘Come, you shall have one, too,’ said she; so they went together.

‘Shall I get you one, duckie?’ asked Tom, rolling two of the puppies into Hope’s lap.

‘Maréchal Niels, please, Tom; and one for Mr. Greville, too.’

She smiled as Tom went off.

‘Evening dress is quite a function here,’ she said. ‘Mr. Lyster has a weakness for seeing his ladies in full “toilette.” Miss Saxon and I brought almost every evening gown we had, and he examines each new one with fresh delight.’

‘I am glad you prepared me—I shall expect to be quite taken off my feet,’ said Greville, amused. ‘Your friend, Miss Saxon, is charming, and they tell me Miss Forde is also handsome.’

‘Yes, very.’

‘It is a sort of enchanted castle of beauty. You will be sorry to leave it.’

‘Yes, very.’

After a moment’s hesitation,

‘I was at Eastbourne last week, and dined with your people,’ he said,—‘Mr. and Mrs. Merrion.’

He had decided that he must tell her this, as she would very likely hear it from either her brother or his wife, and wonder at his concealing it.

‘Oh!’ she said, after a little pause, ‘they start for Switzerland to-morrow, I believe.’

‘Yes. Your brother told me he was very anxious for you to accompany them, but I imagine you have decided against it.’

‘Certainly! Am I not wise? Leave this delightful place for noisy *tables-d’hôte*, hot hotels, mobs of people whom I do not care to see? No, indeed! I shall stay here as long as ever I can.’

‘My sympathies are entirely with you,’ he replied, cordially; ‘one feels the charm of this place at once on arriving.’

‘You don’t know half its attractions until you have dreamed away a morning

in the Pleasaunce, or ridden over the moors at a gallop,' she answered, smiling. 'There is a wonderful fascination about it all.'

'There is,' said Greville; but he was careful not to put too much feeling into his voice.

'Fred and Bertha were quite well, I conclude?' was her next remark.

'They seemed so, though I think your brother seemed a little over-worked—worried by business.'

'He is apt to be like that,' replied Hope, absently.

She did not press the matter further, but she knew, from a certain consciousness in Greville's manner, that he had heard she was staying at Leaming, and had come there to see her.

Was she glad, or sorry?

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAJOR COMMITS HIMSELF.

I mistook my own heart, and that slip
Was fatal.

E. B. BROWNING.

THE beautiful after-glow, so much admired by those in the great hall at Leaming, was equally appreciated by Leo as she came out of the church and waited a moment while her attendant squire locked the great door behind them.

‘How beautiful!’ she sighed, with a tender, transfigured look in her large eyes; and then again, rapturously, ‘How beautiful!’

‘It is,’ replied the Major, as he came and stood beside her.

The peacefulness of the distant hills beyond, and the quiet graves at their feet, seemed emblematic of the peace which he felt sure would come upon him now that he had made up his mind to obey his father, and marry—if he could.

‘It is late! We must hurry home,’ said Leo.

‘Must we? I want to linger,’ replied he.

‘We shall be late for dinner,’ urged the lady.

‘Will that distress you?’ inquired the gentleman.

Leo hesitated, reddened, and at last said, candidly,

‘I am afraid Dick will think I should not be out so late.’

‘I will make it right with Dick,’ said Evelyn, as he unfastened the lych-gate

and let her through; and, as they began to walk down the hill together, he asked, in a low tone, 'It is not because you dislike being with me?'

'No—oh, no!'

How could she? Was he not part, and the chief part, of her present extraordinary happiness? Had there not come upon her suddenly a crowd of those delights which she had been accustomed to think of as existing only in the pages of novels? Had she not found that, in real life, people enjoyed themselves, were pretty, were admired, visited at country-houses, and were favoured with fine weather? Had she not carried lunch to the guns, driven in a four-in-hand, and done several other things which girls in books so often did? It seemed only natural that, to all this, the culminating point should come: that, like the heroines of fiction, she should have a lover too! And yet she was uneasy—vaguely

conscious of a discomfort for which she could find no name.

They walked for two or three minutes in a silence which, she instinctively felt, must be broken through.

‘Dick will have arrived by now,’ she said, in a voice striving to sound natural.

‘Shall you be very glad to see him?’

With a little, unsteady laugh, she answered:

‘You will think me very unnatural, but I shall not be quite as glad as usual, because it means—his coming—that my time here is drawing to an end. He cannot stay longer than a week at the outside, he says; and, when he goes back, I shall go with him.’

‘You will be sorry to leave this place?’

‘How can you ask me? Very, very sorry!’

‘And these people?’

‘Yes,’ softly.

‘Miss Forde,’ said the bashful Major, in a voice which seemed to come from his boots, ‘shall you be sorry to leave *me*?’

Had Leo been one shade less agitated and nervous, she must have laughed; as it was, she knew not what to say, for the question was pointed by Evelyn’s standing stock still in the lane, and facing her.

‘You—have always been very kind to me,’ she brought out at last.

‘I think,’ he answered, thoughtfully, ‘that I should not find it difficult to be kind to you—always.’

Absolutely no answer was possible to this; she could but wait.

‘Will you let me try?’ he asked, after a moment’s thrilling pause.

‘Try?’ echoed Leo, faintly, her knees knocking together.

‘I don’t know whether I ought to ask it,’ stammered the soldier, with shaking

voice. 'It seems so much—so much. I want you to promise to be with me—always: to be my . . . my wife. Will you?'

The steep lane, the green hedges, the glowing star set in purple sky above, were rocking and reeling round the girl. She put out her hands to steady herself, and Evelyn took them in his own.

'Wait—wait—don't answer—don't distress yourself.'

His words seemed to come to her from a long way off, a roaring as of waves was in her ears. The soft little evening breeze blew tenderly over her face, and gradually the mists cleared away. She looked up into his eyes,

'You—said?' she whispered.

'I asked you to be my—in short, I offered myself to you,' he answered. Why did that word 'wife' seem to stick in his throat?

‘To me!’ she repeated.

‘I have never said such words to any other woman,’ he said, speaking more manfully, now that the plunge was over. ‘I know I am a terribly unsatisfactory wooer—my nature is deficient in sentiment—in power of expression. I am a commonplace, hum-drum fellow, and perhaps I have no right to—to anything so young and bright as you. But, if you will trust me, I will try to take great care of you. If I can, I will make you happy. Will you say something to me?’

‘What must I say?’

‘What you feel—only that!’

‘I—I—love you!’ half sobbed the excited child, totally unconscious that he had made to her no similar declaration.

The flood-gates of her romantic girlish feeling were open. Had Evelyn caught her to his heart, and showered kisses upon her, it would have seemed right

and natural, she would have understood and responded.

Nothing was further from her suitor's thoughts than such a line of conduct ; he felt no impulse to do anything of the kind. He thanked her, gently and humbly, for the honour she had done him, and it seemed to Leo as if, just as she reached the door of Paradise, it had been closed in her face. An indefinable sense of want and loss crept over her, agitating her already overstrung nerves to the breaking-down point.

This moment, to which in girlish dreams she had looked forward—which she had imagined would be the crowning-point of her life—had it disappointed her? Like the other experiences of her short career, it had come upon her so unexpectedly, so suddenly. And it was not what she had fancied.

She burst into tears.

This roused all his masculine tenderness and sympathy. As a lover, he must be deficient, because he was acting a part; as a consoler, he followed the natural impulse of his soft heart, and success was the result.

He made her sit down by the roadside, on a hillock, and sat down beside her, close beside her. He put his strong arm round her, held her hand, and begged her pardon for being so rough, so sudden. Could she not forgive him? Finally, after a long hesitation, he stooped, and kissed her rainy eyelids.

Sunshine came again. Leo was ashamed of having been so foolish. Was it likely that a grand, noble, dignified creature like Major Westmorland could descend to demonstrations of affection, like ordinary beings!

She was quite distressed at her folly.

‘Do you feel well enough to walk home?’ he asked at last.

‘Oh, yes!’ She rose, and smiled at him. ‘I—I don’t know what Dick will say,’ she faltered, with burning blushes.

‘You must leave me to tell Dick. And there is someone else to be told, who will be more overjoyed than anyone—my father.’

‘Oh, will he be pleased? Are you sure? Will he not think me much too insignificant for you?’

‘He loves you; I happen to know it. He will be devoted to you. You have no father, and he no daughter. You must be great friends.’

It was altogether too much to be believed. Was it really she, Leone Forde, lately emancipated from the school-room at Sandwater vicarage, but a few weeks ago patronised by the town ladies of Norchester? Was she to be the mistress of Feverell Chase, and to be received with

wide open arms by the fastidious Mr. Westmorland himself?

Enid, when Prince Geraint took her from her culinary labours and rode with her to court, scarcely experienced a more sudden turn of fortune's wheel.

As Hope stood by her open bed-room window, slowly beginning to dress for dinner, the door opened and Muriel peeped in.

‘May I come in for a moment?’

‘Yes, of course.’

Muriel approached the window, which overlooked the gravel sweep at the front of the house.

‘Those two are not in yet,’ she remarked.

‘No,’ returned Hope, busy over the arrangement of some lace on her gown.

After a considerable interval Miss Saxon remarked,

‘You ought not to have left them, Hope.’

‘Well!’ cried Hope, in tones of great amusement. ‘I like that! I am not so fond of playing gooseberry, thank you. I was so evidently not wanted.’

‘Leo is very young,’ replied Muriel, equably, ‘and I rather feel as if you and I were responsible for her. *Mater* didn’t quite like her being asked, you know.’

Hope did not answer.

‘And I am afraid she might perhaps get her head turned by the Major’s going about with her; you see, she can’t know that he only does it to avoid us.’

‘You quite mistake the whole position of affairs,’ replied Hope, slowly. ‘Major Westmorland is going to propose to Leo Forde.’

‘Oh, nonsense, Hope!’

‘You are quite free to call it so, if you please. Events will be my vindication.’

‘Here they come,’ said Muriel, sudden-

ly, and remained, rooted to the window, watching.

It was too dark to see their faces. Evelyn let Leo through the gate, closed it, and came to her side. They passed very slowly up the path together, and Leo paused at one of the rose-trees, gathered a rose, and gave it to her companion. He took it and thanked her, apparently with much earnestness, and so, still talking, disappeared under the portico, and, after an interval of silence, Leo's feet were heard flying along the corridor in the direction of her room.

‘Well?’ said Hope, who also had gone to the window.

‘It is certainly very suspicious,’ acknowledged Muriel.

‘Major Westmorland would never trifle with any woman, of that I am quite sure,’ said Hope in a low voice.

‘I am of the same opinion ; but it is too absurd, too incongruous, the idea of a man like him, and a man who always set his face against matrimony, wanting to marry Leo!’

‘Why is it absurd?’

‘I don’t know of any reason I could put into words ; but the idea of a marriage between those two, is, to me, utterly incongruous.’

Hope was silent.

‘I suppose,’ observed Muriel, presently, ‘that he is marrying to please his father.’

‘What makes his father so anxious for him to marry, Muriel?’

‘Afraid of the family becoming extinct, I suppose. I believe they are the only two living representatives of the name.’

‘Dear me! How many disagreeable duties are entailed upon the owners of property!’ sighed Hope.

‘Such as marriage?’

‘Such as marriage.’

‘It’s a duty a good many people seem to find pleasant,’ remarked Muriel, dreamily.

‘Yes, because they do it of their own accord; that is quite another thing. It is only if you have to do a thing that it becomes irksome.’

‘I daresay,’ said Muriel.

After a few more remarks, she departed, and Hope remained in the gloaming, standing by the window, without ringing for lights or her maid, though it wanted but twenty minutes to dinner-time.

The girl’s proud eyes gazed out far away into the misty distance. At last she spoke—aloud.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I am glad Gilbert Greville has come.’

CHAPTER V.

THE MAJOR BURNS HIS SHIPS.

This is a heart, the queen leant on,
 Thrilled in a moment erratic,
 Ere the true bosom she bent on
 Meet for love's regal dalmatic !
 O, what a moment ecstatic
 Was the poor heart's, ere the wanderer went on,
 Love to be saved for it, proffered to, spent on !
R. BROWNING.

SCARCELY had her maid put the hasty
 finishing touches to Hope's attire, when
 there was a hurried rap on the door, and
 Leo ran in, her face scarlet, her eyes
 shining.

' Oh, Hope ! May I speak to you ? '

‘Most certainly. You may go, Bowen.’

The maid departed, and Hope turned to her visitor.

‘What is it, dear?’ she asked, feeling suddenly much older than Leo, and as if her own youth lay wholly in the past.

Her visitor snatched up a hand-glass, and surveyed her scarlet cheeks.

‘Oh, Hope, just look at my face! I am afraid to go downstairs.’

Hope lightly touched the hot face with her own cool fingers.

‘You are hot,’ she said; ‘you came in late, and were hurried; but it will soon go off.’

‘Hope,’ cried Leo, catching her by the waist, ‘listen, dear; I must speak to you. Sit down here by me on the sofa. I want to tell you something—you *will* listen, won’t you?’

‘Yes, I will listen,’ answered Hope, rather faintly.

They sat down on the little sofa together—a lovely picture, in the candle-light—the doctor's young sister, her youth, bloom, and style giving an air to the inexpensive white muslin she wore; and the London beauty, her bewitching little face and figure done full justice to by perfect hair-dressing, and the magical make of her yellow silken gown.

Leo was silent for a little, and then broke into laughter—laughter that was almost hysterical.

‘It seems so strange—in a way, so ridiculous,’ she said, gasping a little. ‘Hope, did anyone ever ask you to marry him? But, of course, I feel sure somebody must have asked you.’

‘Three people have asked me, Leo.’

‘Three! Oh, how can people live through such things! What did you say to them?’

‘I said no the first two times. One

wanted my money, and the other should not have dared to ask me; he deserved a setting-down, and he got it. The third time I said yes.'

'You did? Then you have been engaged? Oh . . . !' with a long intonation of surprise, 'then you broke it off?'

'Yes. I found I had made a mistake. He was splendid to look at, but he was not good—not true. I was to blame; I accepted him too soon, before I knew him well enough. It was the most miserable time of my life, Leo, and I want to forget it; fortunately it did not last long: three months after I saw him first, it was all over between us.'

Leo surveyed her with curious interest. Then her whole face changed. Winding her arms round her, she hid her face against her neck.

'Hope,' she whispered, trembling ex-

ceedingly, 'do you think Major Westmorland is good?'

There was an eloquent silence in the room. Resentment sprang up hot and high in Hope Merrion's heart; her breath came fast. Could she not have her revenge on her enemy, if she chose, by poisoning Leo's mind against him? It was only an idle thought, it did not assume the magnitude of a temptation. She would not be like him, unjust, blind to the merits of an adversary: he had condemned her unheard, but that could not make her ungenerous.

'Yes, Leo,' she said softly, at last, 'I believe he is good—very good; but stern—stern to himself and others. He makes no allowances; he is pitilessly just.'

'He said—he said,' gasped out Leo, 'that he would be always kind to me.'

After another pause Hope said, and her

voice would sound strained in spite of her,

‘Has he told you he loves you, Leo?’

A scarcely audible assent.

‘And you,’ proceeded Hope, do you love him?’

‘Oh, how can you ask? It is more worship than love that I feel! So high, and great, and stately—so much beyond anyone I ever saw or heard of. Compare him with the men in Norchester—with the Minster clergy. He is almost like a person from another planet. I—reverence him.’

A thought of Marion Erle crossed Hope’s brain, and was indignantly repulsed. She hardly knew what to say to this outburst.

At last—

‘Well, it must be very beautiful,’ she said, quietly, ‘to be in love with a good man; there must be such a feeling of rest about it—of peace after wild storms.’ She

broke off with a laugh. 'There! I am drivelling again,' she cried, 'about rest, as if, at my time of life, I ought to dream of having deserved it!'

'And you feel, I suppose,' she resumed, in a minute or two, 'no fear at the idea of having to be with him all your life? He is such a companion, such a comrade to you; you are so utterly in sympathy with him. You feel that you were created to supply all his needs—that you are the stray half of him, which God sent him into the world to find——'

Leo sat up, with wide eyes.

'Oh, I don't feel like that!' she said, abruptly; but what more she would have said was drowned in the clatter of the great bell. 'Oh, Hope, Hope! that is the bell! What must I do? How can I sit through dinner and look natural, if nobody knows?'

'Far more easily, I should think, than you could if everybody knew.'

‘Do you think so? Well, perhaps—yes. But you will come into the drawing-room with me, will you not?’

‘Certainly, if you wish it. Come, we must make haste.’

Everyone was of course assembled, and the eyes of everyone were on the door as the two girls entered. Leo was very easily able to cover her confusion by running forward to meet her brother, whom she had not yet seen.

The Major, who was seated on the music-stool, let his eyes travel from his young *fiancée* to Miss Merrion’s advancing figure. How that girl varied! It was she who had sat, with a little cotton frock and straw hat, just within the church porch that afternoon, with a bunch of wild-flowers on her knee. Now he beheld a stately figure in primrose yellow silk, heavy and rich, with a train half-across the floor. The small face wore a haughty look, the mien

was all dignity. She softened into a smile as her glance met Greville's, and subsided into a chair beside him.

‘Come, Hope,—come, Hope, my dear,’ cried Mollie, ‘dinner waits! Come, Murie, come everybody! The gentlemen are such a drug in the market that the ladies must go in together.’

Leo scarcely spoke all dinner-time. She found herself between Mollie and Mr. Greville, and the latter thought her the most difficult girl to talk with that he had ever met. Hope, just opposite him, was brilliance itself. She seemed to have the art of giving a subtle expression and point to the most trivial thing she uttered. Greville was a good talker when he chose—had been to many places, and talked with men of various nations. Hope and he so succeeded in gaining the interest of the table as to take off all attention from the

guilty couple, whose painful self-consciousness gradually subsided.

The gentlemen did not remain in the dining-room after the ladies had quitted it, but took their cigars out into the warm gloom of the garden.

Muriel ordered the coffee to be carried out and placed on a basket-table under the tulip-tree on the gravel. A hanging-lamp was fastened to a bough by Tom, and so still was the night, that it burned steadily as in a room. The three girls wrapped themselves up in effective cloaks, and coffee out-of-doors was voted a complete success.

‘How few nights an English summer grants us in which to play such tricks!’ said Greville.

‘The result is,’ said Hope, ‘to make the few times in our lives when we *can* do it, stand out clear and sharp in the memory.’

Evelyn was sitting next her, and he stirred uneasily.

‘I wonder if to-night will be memorable for anything in particular,’ said Tom, meditatively. ‘Suppose, for example, the house was to be burnt down——’

‘Tom!’

‘—Ever afterwards, when one of us said to another, “Do you remember that still night on which we had coffee under the trees at Leaming?” the memory of the flames would rush to our minds, and a strange hush would fall on that merry throng.’

‘It would be a strange hush indeed, if it fell on any assembly where you were present, Thomas,’ said Mollie, genially.

‘Ah, you jest! But you just give me a chance to save your family plate, and see if you are not my debtor for life!’

‘The family plate might go, Tom, if you saved the girls.’

‘Plenty of you to save the girls among you,’ said Tom, scornfully. ‘You would all be rushing after the girls, and meanwhile I should secure the plate-baskets. But there! it won’t happen. No fellow gets a chance of being a hero now-a-days.’

‘No, we are in a prosaic age,’ said Greville, lightly. ‘I think we men sometimes seriously regret it; we should like a few more chances to win our spurs—to be able to give a proof to our lady-love that our strong right arm was really a protection from danger. There are very few men I fancy, now-a-days, who have ever had the chance to strike a blow to protect their lady, and on the whole I think it is a pity.’

‘Should you rank physical courage so high?’ asked Muriel. ‘I have an idea that it would not take much of a hero to knock down anybody who interfered with his property.’

‘It’s the fashion to decry muscle, I know, Miss Saxon ; but I believe a good deal of dross would be cleared away, and a good deal of fine gold discovered, if it were possible to prove who would fight like a man for the protection of the weak.’

‘A good many of these drawing-room chaps with the gift of the gab would go to the wall, I daresay,’ remarked Tom.

‘I do believe the utter cessation of all chance to prove oneself the better man is largely responsible for the decay of chivalry in our age,’ said Richard Forde.

‘The duel killed it,’ replied Greville, thoughtfully. ‘So utterly despicable a form of settlement was of course bound to come to an end.’

‘You recommend fists, then ?’ said Tom, clenching a formidable one.

‘No, he would like to leap into the

lion's den after his lady's glove,' mischievously suggested Hope.

'I should think he would do as the knight in the poem did, then, and fling the glove in her face,' said Tom, in a pugnacious way. 'Oh, you needn't fly out, duckie; I know your beloved Browning tries to make out that the knight was wrong, and the lady was right; but, through the slight drawback of being unintelligible, he has failed to make most people see the point——'

'He has done nothing of the kind, Tom!' cried Hope, as ready for battle as Tom himself could desire. 'Has anybody else, here present, read Browning's poem of the glove?'

Muriel had; and, after an instant's pause, Major Westmorland also admitted that he knew it.

'I should like to hear what he says

about it,' said Greville. 'Myself, I have always considered there was one flaw in the story. Instead of throwing the glove in her face, I should have restored it, with the most profound and elegant bow; and never spoken to her again.'

'And what had she done?' cried Hope; 'only the one thing that no woman may do in this world—taken a man at his word! She threw the glove as a test! For weeks the courtier had been sighing at her feet, imploring her to set him some task—something hard, dangerous, difficult beyond belief. What was there he would not do for her sake? Poor girl! She believed him.'

'Is that Browning's idea?' said Greville, thoughtfully.

'Bless you, no! His is about a theorbo,' said Tom.

'Tom, how can you be so silly?'

‘What *is* a theorbo?’ asked Tom, blandly, of the company.

‘A musical instrument of some kind,’ said the Major’s deep, unwilling voice.

‘I always thought it was Browningesque for glove; somebody dropped it, I know,’ said Tom, with an injured voice.

‘I suppose,’ said Greville, following his own train of thought, ‘that Browning wanted to show the great importance of motive; this lady had done what, in the eyes of the world, was a most cold-blooded, unnatural thing; but, when you learn her motive, the whole aspect of the case is altered: the heroic knight becomes a braggart, who promised more than he ever meant to perform, and the lady takes the place of the injured person.’

For her life, Hope could not have helped looking at Major Westmorland. He happened to be seated next her, and, though

his eyes were in deep shadow, she felt that they rested upon her.

He made a movement she had never seen him make before: a slight, scarcely noticeable action: he passed his hand over his forehead, as if wearily, or in perplexity. The powerful hand fell again upon his knee—listlessly.

‘I have always felt what you say about motive, very strongly,’ said Mollie, in his gentle way. ‘One ought to be so very shy of pronouncing on other people’s actions until we know all the circumstances.’

‘The world would be a happier place if that rule were followed,’ said Hope, very gravely.

‘This is getting very solemn,’ said Tom, frisking up. ‘Quite like a sermon—“Finally, dear brethren, let us go down to the Pleasaunce, and see if we can hear the Rushing Ghyl.”’

‘A good thought, Tom! We ought to

hear it splendidly to-night,' said Mollie, 'what wind there is, sets just in the right direction.'

'What is the Rushing Ghyl?' asked Leo, contriving to speak at last.

'Ah! Little girl! Are you there?' said her brother, kindly. 'Come to me! I haven't heard the sound of your voice all the evening.'

'Rushing Ghyl is the great fall at the top of Limmerdale,' explained Tom. 'It is some miles from here, but it was I who first discovered that you can hear it in the Pleasaunce when the wind is due west.'

'Some peculiarity in the nature of an echo, I expect,' said Mollie. 'For you can only hear it in that one place.'

'Come along,' cried Tom, flashing his lantern on them all.

Dick carried his little sister along with him; Gilbert Greville found himself beside

Muriel. By some inadvertency, Hope and the Major were left to bring up the rear together. It was the first time such a thing had happened since they came to Leaming. She could not exactly detach herself from him, for, without the light of his matches, she must have fallen over shrubs and flower-beds in the thick gloom. She picked her way in silence.

‘You don’t intend to speak to me!’ he burst out presently, to her utter amazement.

‘Nothing of the kind,’ she answered, at once determined to be natural in spite of her unaccountably disturbed feelings; ‘but I was wondering if you would think me presumptuous, if I wished you joy? I suppose congratulations are premature, until Mr. Forde has been consulted; but Leo has told me of—of her happiness, and I should like to tell you that I think you are a fortunate man.’

He was utterly silent. She gave him time; they stumbled on in the dark for several long moments, but not a word was forthcoming.

‘Really,’ said Hope at last, ‘I think such a polite speech deserves the courtesy of a reply. Come! Here and now, by virtue of your own great happiness, try to be a little forgiving; can you be hard and bitter, on such a night as this, so full of stars?’

They had emerged from the gloom of the trees, and by the faint light she could just see his stern, frozen face. A great longing possessed her, at least to be at peace with him—not to bear always about with her the disapproval of his severe eyes. Very timidly she put out a little warm hand and wrist from the folds of her silken cloak.

‘Won’t you shake hands?’ she said, beseechingly.

With any other man on earth she would never have doubted of success ; with him, she feared, she wavered. Perhaps that very wavering turned the scale against her. Slowly, deliberately, as if he wished to emphasize the action, Evelyn put both his hands behind him.

She stood erect, motionless, flushing hotly in the starlight, unable to realize the pain she was enduring. The glove had been thrown in her face.

Degraded, ashamed in her own eyes, without a word passing between them, she turned away, moving slowly, with uncertain steps, wondering whether it could really have happened that she, Hope Merrion, with all her pride, all her resolution, should have made an advance towards reconciliation, and been met with insult, and rebuff.

It had all happened in a moment, she did not see what became of him—whether

or not he followed her. It seemed as if that scorching blush were burned into her cheeks.

‘The blow a glove gives is but weak ;
Does the mark still disfigure my cheek ?
But, when the heart suffers a blow,
Will the pain pass so soon, do you know ?’

Westmorland stood, as she left him, watching the slight figure cross the turf, pause a moment by the old sun-dial as if for support, and then stray on again, towards the ivy archway. He saw Greville’s trim form and white expanse of shirt-front appear in the archway, and heard his voice saying,

‘Miss Merrion ! I came to hasten you !
Rushing Ghyl is distinctly audible—the effect is most weird ! It seems as though a flood were roaring down upon us from the hills !’

The listener stood until these two had disappeared into the shadows, and then dropped his face into his hands.

‘That’s over! It’s over now! Thank God!’ were his strange words.

Then, collecting himself, he repaired to the Pleasaunce by another path; for was he not betrothed, and was not his betrothed awaiting him there?

‘Take my arm, Miss Merrion,’ said Greville, in his pleasant way, ‘or you may stumble in this darkness.’

Hope was really glad of the support, though she was able to summon a little laugh, and declare she felt like the ever-lovely Miss Beverley.

‘Do you know, I am thinking over that story of the glove,’ said her cavalier, seriously, ‘and I am inclined to think that this Browning, whom you defend so ably, was right. Perhaps, however, I am always rather prone to believe in a woman, as against a man.’

‘Are you?’ she said, turning to him with a warmth, an interest, she had never

shown him before. 'It is refreshing to meet a man who believes in woman. Oh, a woman will do *anything* for a man who believes in her! She will never disappoint him, she is bound, by all the strongest reasons that women know, to be in reality all that he thinks her . . . I beg your pardon for being so vehement, but you remember how eager I always am on any point where I feel strongly.'

'I remember,' he answered, gently, though again he wisely did not throw too much intention into his expressive voice.

They had reached the Pleasaunce, where the others stood, and, after a murmur of greeting, all subsided into a rapt stillness, hearkening to the distant roar of the great waterfall, which rose and fell on the ear as though some huge door were opened and shut at irregular intervals. In the pause, Hope could collect her shattered

nerves and summon her fortitude. She could breathe and think—could live over again in fancy that hateful moment of her humiliation, and dig her nails into her little hands, her teeth into her lip, as she recalled it.

It must be war to the knife now: no more pretence at a truce. And only this evening she had told Leo that she thought him good! He was more than hard; he was vindictive—vindictive and unmanly. What a fate would be that of such a man's wife, if she happened to offend him!

But perhaps he, even he, had another side to his nature—'to show a woman, when he loved her.' Did he love Leo?

Hope dared to raise her eyes and look across the grass to where they stood, side by side. They were not speaking. There was nothing in their action from which to learn anything. Only she felt as Muriel had felt, without being able to say why;

that there was something incongruous in the idea of their marriage.

‘We will ride to Rushing Ghyl to-morrow—you shall all see it,’ Mollie’s cheerful voice was heard saying.

‘Hark! What was that?’ said Muriel, suddenly.

They listened. Somebody was shouting, far off and indistinctly, calling some name repeatedly, though all that could be heard sounded like ‘Or—or—or!’

‘Is it Tom’s fire?’ asked Richard Forde.

The voice approached. It will be remembered that the Pleasaunce, to which these eccentric people had all betaken themselves, was at the extreme end of the large, old-fashioned, rambling garden. At last a name could be distinguished.

‘Mr. Lyster, sir! Are you there? Dr. Forde, sir! Are you there?’

‘It’s Burrows,’ said Mollie, in a mystified way, as Tom sent back an answering

whoop. 'What can possibly be the matter?'

Burrows was the fat and elderly butler. In another minute or two, a light glimmered behind the pea-sticks, and he emerged into view, a lighted carriage-lamp in one hand, a silver salver in the other.

'Bless me!' said Mollie, peering through his spectacles.

Burrows was breathless and agitated.

'It's a telegraph, sir,' he panted, 'a telegraph for the doctor. I thought he must see it at once, while the messenger got a bit of supper.'

Owing to the remote nature of the place—the portage was five shillings—telegrams were rare in the experience of this archaic retainer. There was a general laugh of relief, as Richard took up the orange envelope.

'One of my patients kicking over the traces, I expect,' said he. 'Sorry, Leo.'

He opened it, held it near his eyes, but was obliged to call for Tom's lantern to assist his sight. It was an odd scene, stamped in Hope's memory always: the little group of expectant people, the tossing light, which

‘Struck up into the trees, and laid
Upon their under leaves unwonted light,
And, when he held it low, how far it spread,
O'er velvet pansies, slumbering in their bed.’

‘Why,’ cried Dick, in a surprised voice, with a pleased laugh, ‘here’s an absurd thing! ’Twill shorten our visit here, though, Leo, I’m afraid! Westmorland! this will interest you. Only think! Disney has arrived! He is awaiting us at Minster-gate!’

CHAPTER VI.

DON'T YOU LIKE HOPE ?

There's a secret in his breast
Which will never let him rest.

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

‘I DON'T think,’ said Richard, in a bewildered way, ‘that I was ever so surprised in all my life, and I'm not easily surprised. Say it again, Westmorland, that I may be assured of the normal use of my faculties. I am under no hallucination ! You really, seriously, tell me that you want to marry my little Leo ?’

‘That's so,’ said the Major, poking baby ferns ruthlessly out of the clefts of the wall with his stick.

‘Well!’ said Richard again, removing his after-breakfast cigar from his mouth, and staring up into the blue sky above him, ‘I repeat, I am so amazed that I don’t know what to say!’

‘May I ask,’ said Evelyn, stiffly, ‘what is so very surprising? when I told you, a few weeks ago, that I was set against the idea of marrying, you told me that you considered me, for that very reason, a promising candidate for matrimony.’

‘True,’ said Forde, more gravely. ‘I said so, and I was right: it is not your wanting to marry that bowls me over so completely; it’s your wanting to marry my sister!’

‘Is that so very hard to understand?’ asked Leo’s grim suitor.

‘It’s a novelty to me, you see,’ said the doctor, with a sigh. ‘She is young. I hoped to have kept her with me for a year or two, at least. It will make such a

difference ; you don't know how she brightened my life !'

‘ She is very bright——’

‘ Then,’ Dick interrupted, ‘ there is the other aspect of the case. I am not such a fool as to imagine that my sister is a match for you, Westmorland. Two thousand pounds when she comes of age is the extent of her dowry, and in point of position, why——’

‘ Nothing of that kind is of the least consequence,’ hurriedly said Evelyn. ‘ It is a poor compliment to Miss Forde, but you know my father is so desirous of my marriage that he would welcome almost any wife I chose to present to him. He admires your sister immensely, and I fancy his only feeling will be intense surprise that she could care about such an uninteresting person as myself.’

Dick looked narrowly at the speaker.

‘ You must remember,’ said he, ‘ that, in

my interview with your father, he showed none of this anxiety for your marriage.'

'No,' replied Evelyn, slowly, 'because I think he saw, then, the way things were going. I was playing tennis with your sister that afternoon.'

'Ah! so you were! . . . and I suppose the mischief was irrevocably done the night of the *tableaux vivants*?'

Evelyn thought of his encounter with his father that night, and could answer truly.

'Yes, I made up my mind then. I only came here, to Leaming, because she was invited.'

'Aha!' said Dick, thinking how deep these quiet fellows were. 'Well! I know she considers you the greatest hero living, an embodiment of all the champions of romance, but I don't expect she imagined for a moment that her Jove would descend from the clouds and woo her!'

Remorseful memories of his blundering courtship brought a most unwonted red to the Major's brow.

‘She—she was very much upset,’ he said, ruefully. ‘I was too sudden, I think. I don’t know anything about women, you see.’

‘Poor little Leo!’ said Richard, softly.

‘I’ll do anything—everything in my power to make her happy,’ faltered Evelyn, ‘we live simply, you know, but both of us would like a little more life about the house. She can have anything she wants, in reason, and my father will dote upon her.’

‘You would think of living at Feverell, then, with Mr. Westmorland?’

‘Why—yes. I couldn’t leave him, I’m afraid,’ said Evelyn, struck as with a new idea. ‘Do you think Miss Forde will dislike it? The house is large enough for us all three, I think.’

‘Oh, you must consult her about that. I daresay you will have no difficulty: she is too young to have very deep-rooted proclivities. My little Leo! Dear me, how odd! Never once did it cross my mind; and yet, now that it is done, I will tell you frankly that I would rather see her married to you than to any other man I know. I believe in you.’

Evelyn sighed. How hard it was, this approach to marriage which he had dutifully set himself to climb. How slowly the hours had passed since yesterday evening, when he obtained Leo's promise. Had he ever passed such a long night before—each hour lengthened into two, and marked mournfully by the old church clock?

He consoled himself by the sentence he had written of old in his first Latin exercise-book, ‘All beginning is difficult.’ He had manfully made his beginning, torn away and flung out of his heart anything

that offended. No wonder that, so soon after amputation, he should feel lacerated and weak. He meant to love Leo dearly; to devote his life to her as soon as this brief madness was over. It would very soon be over now. Richard had telegraphed Disney to make himself at home until to-morrow, and then Major Westmorland and the Fordes would return to Norchester, and the engagement be duly announced.

That would be the hour of Evelyn's reward. He could look his friend in the eyes without shame, having wrestled with and cast out temptation. And his father's joy! He could fancy his approving glance, his warm grasp of the hand, the health and elasticity which would return to him now that the overshadowing dread of the prophecy was gone.

'I thought something was up with the little woman last night,' said Dick, with a meditative smile, as they reached the end

of the shrubbery and turned. 'She was so subdued ; I daresay, if we had been alone, it would all have come out.'

'Here she comes,' said the Major, suddenly, as a vision of a summer-dress appeared at the end of the green nut-tree avenue. 'She said she should join us when I had prepared you.'

Leo came towards them, slowly and shyly, her face sober with the awe of her new condition, her eyes fixed wistfully on Richard.

'Well,' he said, as soon as she was within ear-shot, 'this is a nice business to let me in for the minute after breakfast.'

'Oh, Dick !' she cried, beseechingly ; and running to him, hugged him heartily, hiding her glowing face in his shoulder. 'It seems so disgusting of me to think of preferring anybody to you, dear !'

'That's nature, Leo,' said her brother,

gravely. 'Of course I don't understand it; I don't understand how any woman could prefer any man in the world to me. I have to accept it as an unaccountable fact.'

'Oh, Dick, don't make fun!'

'I am not often accused of such a thing, but you and I seem to have changed characters to-day. Have you not a smile for your lover here?'

She turned her face to Evelyn then, and gave him a look which he must have been flint indeed not to respond to—a look so maidenly, and yet so ardent, would have flattered any man.

His unwonted smile lighted up his face, and he stretched out his arms to her.

'Leo! I think Richard will let me have you,' he said, unsteadily.

'Let her speak!' said Richard, holding her back. 'Look well at him, Leo! Do

you really care about him—so many years older and wiser than yourself?’

‘Oh, Dick! Dick! You know!’

‘You are sure you know your own mind, my child?’

‘Oh, quite sure!’

‘Then I suppose it must be! I must give you up. But you must allow me time, Leo—time to grow used to the idea of losing you. There! I must take a stroll, and think it over. I daresay you two will excuse me. Little scamp!’ he concluded, fondly. ‘Fancy your being Mrs. Westmorland, of Feverell Chase.’

He released her with a very tender kiss: and then Evelyn came forward.

‘Come down and sit by the beck, and we will talk,’ he said, drawing her willing hand through his arm.

They wandered away together, down the steep woody glade, to the side of the noisy

beck where, two or three days ago, they had fished. Very silently, now, they sat down on a mossy stone: and Evelyn wondered what he should say. His betrothed saved him the trouble of beginning.

‘I want to tell you something,’ she said, shyly.

‘Yes, Leo?’ Tell me—anything!’

‘You will not be angry?’

‘I can safely promise that!’

‘Well, it is this: I felt so—yesterday evening—so strange, you know, that I felt, whatever happened, I *must* tell someone. So I told Hope—you are not angry?’

‘No—certainly not.’

‘You looked angry!’

‘It is my forbidding expression: you must teach me to look pleasant, won’t you? I am a dull fellow, and you are like one of those bright, flashing humming-birds that dart about in the sunlight. Are you not afraid of growing moped and grave like me?’

‘No,’ she said, lightly brushing the shoulder of his rough coat with her velvety cheek. ‘I love you so.’

‘God bless you!’ he cried, in a sudden burst of thankfulness, ‘it is new to me to be loved;’ and he kissed her with a warmth which astonished him.

The kiss was a very great and agitating matter to Leo. He had to soothe her as best he could. He felt constrained to beg her pardon so many times that at last she was obliged to laugh, and that set them on an easier footing. He began to talk to her of many things—his father’s welcome for her, and the old Chase at Feverell which would be her home, and the wonderful old sapphire ring which had belonged to the Westmorlands for many generations, and which he meant should be her betrothal-ring. Talk like this was easy, and at the end of an hour he felt that he had been neither bored nor miserable, and a hope

began to dawn that one day, in the future, he should forget his present pain, looking upon it as a sick delusion, and give thanks for the resolution that enabled him to live through that scene last night in the starlit garden. To-morrow would be the end. He should leave Leaming and Hope Merrion behind, and begin his new life in earnest.

‘And I may give parties at Feverell, and invite my friends to stay with me!’ cried Leo, joyfully. ‘It will be like a fairy-tale. I know who will be the first guest I invite—Hope! I am so fond of her.’

There was no need for the Major to tell her that he did not wish this particular guest invited; he knew too well that Hope Merrion would never cross his threshold.

‘She thinks you very good,’ said Leo presently.

‘What?’ was his inelegant and startled ejaculation.

‘Hope thinks you very good. I asked her yesterday evening.’

‘She said so?’

‘Yes. Poor Hope! she has been so unhappy. She was engaged to be married, and she found out that the man she was engaged to was not good; she was disappointed in him, and she had to break it off. She told me it was the most miserable time of her life.’

‘Did she mention in what way she was disappointed?’ asked Evelyn, drilling holes in the moss with his stick.

‘She didn’t exactly say, as far as I remember,’ said Leo, thoughtfully. ‘If I had asked more, I think she would have told me more; but I was so full of my own concerns. I have an idea—that is, I gathered, from what she said, that he told her a falsehood.’

‘Oh!’ said Evelyn, helplessly.

The sound of the great outdoor bell now pealed through the house.

‘Oh!’ cried Leo, starting up, ‘that is for early lunch. You know we are all to ride to Rushing Ghyl directly afterwards! I must make haste; I ought to put on my habit before lunch.’

He helped her up the mossy bank, and walked at her side with his thoughts once more rebelliously full of the forbidden topic. It seemed as if Leo, too, were still dwelling on her friend’s unlucky love-affair, for she presently said,

‘I am trying to recall something Hope said yesterday before we met you. Was it really only yesterday? It seems to me years ago. Everything has happened since . . .’ She broke off into musing.

‘Well?’ said Evelyn, hating himself for his inability to repress the question.

‘She said,’ said Leo, ‘that she was the cause—the innocent cause—of a great

wrong being done. We were leaning against that gate on the church hill, and she cried as she told me about it. She said the wrong could never be put right now, and that there was something, here in Leaming, that reminded her of it. She is not happy, I am sure ; I believe she would like to die.'

'That seems unnatural.'

'Don't you like Hope?' said Leo, innocently. 'You always seem vexed if I talk about her.'

'I know very little of her ; but I must say she does not convey to me the impression of being unhappy, or of wishing to die,' he said, bitterly.

They were nearing the hall-door as he spoke, and the words were barely out of his mouth, when, as if to corroborate them, a peal of laughter—Hope's own clear laughter—burst upon their ears. They hurried in.

The hall was filled with a crowded audience—most of the servants, Mollie, Muriel, Richard Forde, and Greville. In the centre were ranged twelve chairs, in a circle, eight or nine feet across. In each chair sat a dog, in sizes varying from Mollie's yard-mastiff to Muriel's toy terrier. The faces of the twelve were a study, all being fixed with rapture on Hope, who, attended by the ever faithful Tom, stood in the centre of the circle with a plate of cake. She dexterously threw a morsel to each dog in rapid succession, and, what with the skill and precision of her aim and the accomplishment of the dogs, she threw two rounds without any missing. It was a ludicrous sight. Mollie laughed till he was forced to take off his spectacles, and wipe his eyes. The frantic excitement of the dancing, yapping terriers, the trembling tearfulness of the spaniels, and the utter unconcern of Tom's fine St. Bernard, whose

huge jaws opened and shut, as his master observed, 'like a portcullis,' were irresistible.

The two fresh arrivals on the scene seemed to animate Hope anew. She had never looked more brilliant, more daring, more dangerous. Greville's eyes were fixed upon her; he looked like a man under a spell.

'There, Larrie! The last bit is for you, because you are old and suffering,' she said, tossing a morsel to the Major's old Skye, which was the only dog he brought with him to Hesselburgh. 'There! the performance is over. Down, dogs! Now, Brown,'—to the groom—'you may take Don back to the yard. He has been as good as gold; I told you he would.'

'Yes, miss,' grinned Brown, 'but you've got such a way with the dawgs!'

'And now, madcap, come to lunch, or you will have time for none,' said Mollie, patting her shoulder.

‘I say, we haven’t sent the hat round yet!’ cried Tom.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, knowing your needy circumstances, we will accept a round of applause instead,’ said Hope, modestly.

It was given with hearty goodwill, nearly sending the terriers into hysterics. Tom and she bowed their acknowledgments, and marched into the dining-room in state, arm-in-arm.

‘Wasn’t it a beautiful performance?’ asked Tom, breathlessly, of Greville, to whom he had taken a great fancy.

‘Splendid. Was it quite impromptu?’

‘Oh, quite! It came into our heads through seeing three of them sitting in a row on hall chairs, and then we hunted up all the others.’

Greville put up his double eye-glass, the better to study this new phase in Miss Merrion’s character. What a head of his

establishment she would make! What a hostess! All that glee—those spirits—that ease, combined with such undoubted breeding. He had heard several London men—visitors at Fred Merrion's—say that 'Miss Merrion, the heiress, was so confoundedly stand-offish.'

Ah, if they could see her among those she loved!

CHAPTER VII.

I KNOW THEY HAVE A CURSE.

And they felt the breath of the downs, fresh-blown
Over leagues of clover, and cold grey stone.

BRET HARTE.

‘MAKE the most of to-day, my children, for the weather is going to change,’ said Tom, as he altered the length of his stirrups, standing on the hall door-step.

‘Nonsense, Tom! I never saw it look more settled in my life,’ said Muriel, who was already mounted on her own beautiful little mare.

‘All right! You know better than old Benjamin, I suppose. He says the glass

has been creeping slowly down for three days, and that means a week of pouring rain with the wind in this quarter; so gather your roses while ye may, knights and ladies all.'

'I shall not mind going away so much, if it turns wet,' whispered Leo, softly, to the Major, who had just put her into the saddle, and was now loosening a strap for her.

Nothing had as yet been said of the engagement. Mr. Westmorland must be consulted before it could be announced. Hope had not even spoken of it to Muriel. She felt as if the mere mention of Evelyn Westmorland's name would choke her.

All through the sleepless hours of the summer night she had lain, watching the stars—seeing the first glow of dawn in the wan east, and hearing the earliest chirp of the waking birds in the ivy outside her window.

She was a prey to a pain which she could not understand. A depression, totally unlike anything she had ever felt before, weighed her down. She knew its ostensible cause; the affront offered her by an ignorant, angry, prejudiced young man in the garden the night before. But why should this have taken such terrible hold upon her? When had she ever cared for people's misjudgment of her before? Last winter, in Colombo, everyone had agreed to believe that Miss Merrion had treated that nice young Disney abominably; and opinions had been pretty freely expressed. What had she heeded? All disapproving looks, innuendoes, hints of unconscionable flirtation, and attitudes of pained surprise had been as nothing to her. Why was this latest champion of her discarded lover so much more formidable? Why was his disapprobation to crush her?

The only reasons she could think of

were three in number. In the first place, she had been obliged to be in the same house with him, and consequently had, as it were, lived in an atmosphere of his contempt; secondly, he would prejudice Leo against her—Leo, for whom she had conceived so genuine a liking; thirdly, she had so far forgotten herself as to ask him to be friends with her, and he had declined. She supposed that it must be an admixture of these feelings which weighed so heavily upon her soul, yet all of them combined seemed yet inadequate as a reason for the abyss of dreariness into which she had suddenly sunk. Her own pallor and heavy-lidded appearance, when she looked in her glass on rising, had startled her. Desperate measures must be taken. Whatever happened, she must not seem to care. Nobody must remark that she looked pale, or out of spirits.

So far, she had been completely success-

ful. Mollie thought he had never seen her so gay, so irresistibly, infectiously merry, and, after all, it was only for to-day—only a few hours more, then her enemy would be gone, and she should never, never see him again. She could shake off the memory of his dislike and his rudeness, and life would be again as it had been for her on that dewy morning when Tom and she went mushrooming in the park.

So she boldly told herself, but in vain. Vaguely she felt that she could never reconstruct the Hope who drove that brilliant morning in the dog-cart to Norchester station, to meet the strange, morose, unbending man, who by utterly declining to succumb to her influence, by mutely refusing even to be at peace with her, had succeeded in giving her so deep an impression of her own insufficiency.

‘For,’ she had argued to herself in the nocturnal silence, ‘though I was not guilty

in the way he thinks, yet can I honestly say that I was not to blame in the Disney affair? What am I? What have I been all my life but a butterfly, living in the sunshine of admiration—happy, because I was petted and made much of? Why did I say “yes” to Edgar Disney? Because he was handsome and winning, and it was very pleasant to be loved as he seemed to love me! Did it go any deeper? Did I ask myself what I was prepared to suffer, to give up for him, if called upon? I never once thought of the word “self-sacrifice,” in connection with love. I never thought of self-sacrifice at all, until I met him—this man who is my enemy. When first I saw him, simply and naturally devoting his life and energies to the care of a fretful, conceited old man, who undervalued him, made use of him, sneered at him; and when I saw that all the time he never even knew that there was anything

which anybody could call fine in his conduct, that he simply did it because it did not occur to him to do anything else—that such service, which expected no reward, was absolutely natural to him: then I knew the meaning of the love which *is* self-sacrifice. I knew what that man would be when he loved a woman! Oh, that is the sting of it! That is the sting of it! In this one point on which we are at feud, I am right, and he is wrong; but in ourselves, it is the other way. He is noble; I am paltry. He quietly and unconsciously lays down his own will to do his father's; I live to amuse myself! No wonder he despises me! I despise myself!

Such thoughts would come; they were not to be dismissed; again her mind was full of them as her maid arranged her habit and fastened her hat securely.

Was there nothing she could do to make

her respect herself? No duty in the world for her to perform? Who was there of her kith and kin who needed her devotion? The only ones she loved were Fred's children, and they had all they wanted, including even a most exceptionally good governess. Hope had a great respect for Mabel Thorpe, and a great tenderness for her story. She was the eldest of a clergyman's swarming family, a poor vicar whose struggles to educate his children and serve his parish had broken down his health and spirits. Mabel was engaged to his curate, Arthur Strange—as hopeless an engagement as could well be imagined; yet the courage of these two never failed. Secure of one another's love, no reverse of fortune seemed to have power over them; and this was true love, as Hope felt.

‘You look pale, Miss Merrion,’ observed Bowen.

‘You don't say so! Do I?’ cried Hope,

snatching up a hand-glass. 'I wish I had some rouge! I would put it on.'

'Your ride will freshen you up, miss. You was all up too late last night, that's what it is. I think, miss, you are quite ready, and I fancy you are keeping the party waiting; so you had better go.'

'Now for it again,' was Hope's inward adjuration to herself. 'Into the arena once more; it will soon be over, remember!'

She had not spoken to Evelyn that day, and only once had encountered his eyes as he entered the hall where, as Tom said, they were playing the fool with the dogs. He had come in with Leo, and stood on one side, that expression of unbending, rigid scorn on his face. How well she knew it! How she felt what it expressed! She had answered it with her most flip-pant smile, but her heart had ached ever since.

Down the staircase she ran, past the oil painting of Mollie's dead young wife, which hung over the hearth in the hall. That picture had been a very severe disappointment to Hope at first, it represented such a plump, rosy, cheerful young person, with no trace in her round blue eyes of

‘That look they say they have
In their faces, who die young.’

Moreover, Mrs. Lyster had been married and painted in those terrible days of the ‘chignon,’ and was represented decked out in all the fashion of her time, in chalky white muslin and pink ribbons, a long gold watch-chain and an ivory cross on a piece of black velvet tied tight round her neck. It was, however, a face which grew upon you, it was so fresh and honest and happy; and to-day Hope envied it as she passed. To be so truly loved, so sincerely and permanently mourned, is not the portion of many women.

Outside, everyone was mounted, except Mr. Greville, and Tom greeted her with a shout of

‘Hurry up, duckie!’

‘Am I keeping you all waiting?’ said she. ‘I am very sorry.’

‘Let me put you up, Miss Merrion?’ pleaded Greville.

‘Am I to ride Peony?’ continued she, as she stood just inside the doorway, surveying the party. ‘Oh, yes, I see I am. I hope she is not too fresh, Brown?’

‘Well, yes, miss, perhaps she is a bit fresh,’ confessed the groom, who held Peony’s head, ‘but she won’t give you no trouble, miss, no more than the dawgs did;’ and Brown grinned, a stable auxiliary in the background grinning likewise, having evidently heard of and appreciated Miss Merrion’s new way of amusing the company.

Hope felt a trifle indignant with herself

for her undignified escapade, and really a little nervous about her ride. Fearless as she was in all other ways, she was strangely enough rather a timid horsewoman, having had a bad fall as a child.

‘Did you not exercise her yesterday, as I asked you, Brown?’ she said, reproachfully.

‘Well, I couldn’t manage it exactly yesterday, miss, with the shooting and the station and the luggage; but bless you, miss, she’s all right, as quiet as a lamb; and a canter on the moor’ll soon take the sperrit out of her.’

‘What is it, Hope?’ cried Muriel, whose horse was moving slowly down the drive.

‘I’m afraid Peony will run away with me again, as she did the other day!’

‘Oh, nonsense,’ cried Tom; ‘up with you! She only bolted about fifty yards, and that was because she saw a traction-engine.’

‘Well, if there are many traction-engines about to-day, I hope some kind person will come to her head,’ said Hope, resignedly, ‘for I could not have stopped her last week if a precipice had been in front of us.’

‘Why, you did stop her—pulled her up splendidly!’

‘Only because a steep, long hill befriended me. But I will mount, and say no more about it. I am very foolish and cowardly, I know.’

‘Is there not another horse you could have?’ asked Greville, in a low voice, as she sprang lightly to her seat.

She shook her head.

‘Peony is the only one who will carry a habit, except Muriel’s own mare; and Miss Forde must have the old pony, because she is quite a beginner; and really this one goes beautifully—I liked her very much till she frightened me by bolting:

it is foolish to be nervous, but I don't seem able to help it.'

'She will not bolt to-day, with so many of us in the party,' said Greville, reassuringly. 'What a cavalcade! Eight of us. Does Lyster mount us all?'

'The Saxons brought their own horses, and Major Westmorland his hunter: the others are all from the Leaming stables.'

'Lyster seems quite to have adopted the two young Saxons.'

'Oh, yes; Tom is his heir,' said Hope, as they moved slowly onward a little to the rear of the rest of the party. 'He is to have everything, except a sum—ten thousand pounds, I believe it is—which goes to Muriel. It is very curious, how unequally things are divided in this world!'

'Are you thinking of any particular instance?' he said, as she broke off.

'Yes, I am thinking that Muriel and

Tom will be as rich as need be, without this fortune of Mollie's; and I know a girl to whom half that ten thousand pounds would mean everything—freedom to marry the man she loves.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes, she is such a brave girl—engaged to a curate in a large, desolate country parish, with no chance of preferment. I wish I could help them.'

Greville thought her generous sympathy exceedingly becoming.

'Do you know nobody with any church patronage?' he asked.

'Church patronage?' said she, puzzled.

'I suppose you know that some families have livings in their gift?'

'Why, yes; I never thought of that,' she said, as if struck with the idea.

'You know so many people, I think you must know somebody who could help you in that way,' he said. 'I, unfortunate-

ly, have no presentation ; but Major Westmorland, now—there are two or more livings in the Westmorland gift, I know for a fact. Why don't you ask him ?'

A curious tightening came over the pretty lips.

'Major Westmorland is a very slight acquaintance,' said she, curtly.

Greville looked at her with a momentary surprise.

'A thoroughly good fellow, by all accounts,' he said, tentatively ; 'at least, he was very popular in the army.'

'He and I don't get on very well together, somehow,' replied Hope.

'Has he not a very eccentric father?'

'His father,' she answered, incisively, 'belongs to a school of good manners long since obsolete ; he has not succeeded in transmitting any of them to his son.'

'Are his manners not good ? That is supposed to be a prevalent fault, now-a-

days,' said Greville, musingly. 'I thought myself yesterday that he seemed rather wool-gathering, but I imagined the cause was to be sought there,' nodding towards Leo's slim figure, 'and that it was a temporary phase. I suppose,' he added, smiling a little, 'that the Curse will not come off, after all.'

'The Curse?' said Hope, much mystified.

'Yes, the doom of the Westmorlands; surely you have heard of it?'

'Never, indeed!'

'Well, such modesty is refreshing now-a-days,' cried Greville, 'it is what I could not hope to imitate! If I had a right-down genuine Curse, centuries old, in my family archives, I should send it to all the society papers, and I should be the hero of the hour! Do the Westmorlands really never talk of theirs?'

'I never heard a word of it; are you not joking?'

‘No, on my honour. I know they have a Curse. This Major Westmorland’s mother was Lady Gertrude Coniston, you know—Lord Ulleswater’s daughter.’

‘I know that his second name is Coniston.’

‘Very likely. My people are related to the Conistons, and that is how I heard of the matter.’

‘But what is the Curse? Do tell me.’

‘I’m afraid I never heard the details; but it is something to do with the estate being held by a younger son, and, as the Major’s father was a younger son, I believe he is much afraid that the prophecy will be fulfilled in his day.’

‘The Major is afraid?’

‘No, his father. I have been told that he is quite cracked on the subject, but rumour doubtless exaggerates these things.’

‘Certainly I never heard of it,’ replied Hope, wonderingly, ‘though everybody

seems to admit that old Mr. Westmorland is very tiresome.'

As she spoke, the horses reached the end of the steep, wooded lane, up which they had been climbing; and, with a burst, the whole of the wide moorland lay before them, with its heaving ridges, its rounded turf heights crowned with rocky tors, and its white, lonely ribbon-like roads, stretching away apparently into illimitable distance.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER.

‘I and my mistress, side by side,
Shall be together, breathe, and ride,
So, one day more am I deified.
Who knows but the world may end to-night?’

R. BROWNING.

SIMULTANEOUSLY they all reined in their horses for a few minutes, to enjoy that panorama. The sun brooded over it, hot and sleepy, and the few clouds in the south-west were too distant and too motionless to make them apprehensive. To Hope there was always a strange, unwilling fascination in the silence and solitude of the moor: a desire to wander off there by

herself, which was horrible, and yet could not be resisted. She thought of the scape-goat, and the land not inhabited, as her eye roamed over the ridges.

‘You cannot see very far, the ground is too irregular,’ said Greville.

‘Oh, no, you never get an extensive view,’ answered Mollie, ‘the hills seem to rise behind you as you advance. Before we have got very far into the moor, you will not be able to see a scrap of cultivated ground.’

‘But you said there were such lovely ferns and trees at Rushing Ghyl!’ said Leo, who was beginning to find her tongue again. ‘This place looks too bare and desolate for ferns and trees!’

‘We must ride some miles before we come to them,’ said Mollie, ‘the river-valley is hidden away so cunningly; but I can show you where it lies—over yonder, behind the hill with a pointed rock at the

top. That is Carra Tor, and there is a cromlech on the further side of it.'

'A cromlech?' said Leo.

'Yes, an altar-stone, where the Druids offered sacrifice; have you never seen one?'

'Never!'

'There is a curious tradition about this one,' he said, smiling, 'which Tom, as a little boy, was very fond of hearing.'

'About the human victim?' cried Tom.
'Yes, Mollie used to be a very good hand at describing the old altar-stone streaming with blood, and the Druids with their coats off warming up well to their work, when, just at the moment that the knife was lifted to knock the young Christian martyr on the head—what happened, Mollie?'

'Oh, you may as well finish, as you have begun so successfully.'

'Well,' said Tom, 'a jet of water spouted up from the stone, which was taken to be a

sign that the gods wanted to put a stop to the execution ; and there is the round hole still, where the fountain came out.'

'My father would tell you,' said Evelyn, smiling, 'that the hole was made intentionally in the stone by the Druids, to carry off the blood ; there is such a hole in most cromlechs.'

'A nasty, spiteful piece of nineteenth century rationalism,' said Tom, indignantly. 'I shall relate no more ecclesiastical legends.'

'For the best of reasons—you don't know any,' said Muriel, placidly. 'Come, Mollie, we will give them a lead.'

Off scoured the pretty mare and after her all the others, the dull thunder of their hoofs on the short warm turf awaking a strange excitement in all the young blood. Peony, who had been very calm and even depressed as they toiled up the stony lane, no sooner felt the elasticity of the ground

beneath her, than she began to bound and dance, and Greville cast a watchful eye on her rider. It was easy to see that Hope was nervous, but she smiled bravely at him, her slim little figure very erect, her eyes very bright.

‘I don’t mind her jumping about, if only she does not bolt,’ she said. ‘I had a bad fall once, and now, however much I try to help it, directly I feel unable to pull my horse up, I always live over again that minute of being shot over its head into the road ; and it unnerves me.’

The next ridge—a pretty steep one—seemed to calm the horse’s spirits to a more decorous playfulness, and soon Hope could begin to chat again to her cavalier.

He had a great deal to say of travels, books, and pictures ; he could discuss the last play, contrast the merits of rival composers, estimate the value of this year’s and last year’s Academy Exhibitions, enter into

the political situation, and name the reigning family on every throne in Europe. Not only was he well-bred, well-read, and sensible, but he knew how to express himself with point and accuracy, and yet give no disagreeable impression of having got up his subject, nor of quoting his opinions from reviews, nor of talking for talking's sake. He was a man who would always be a social success. Every little bit of knowledge he possessed was immediately ready to hand, and useful; and he had also the tact which enabled him almost at once to know on what topic his companion for the time being would like to talk.

Hope thought what a pleasant companion he was, and mentally compared him with the taciturn, uncompromising Major, who never by any chance would open his lips to an audience of more than one if he could help it.

Greville was very anxious to-day to

turn this general talk into more personal channels ; but, with habitual tact, he saw that this was not quite possible. There was no shade of consciousness in Miss Merrion's manner—nothing to give him a loop-hole, an excuse for introducing himself or his hopes. She rode at his side indeed, she seemed desirous of doing so, and in no way anxious of changing her cavalier. But she was out of spirits, he thought, and wanted nothing less than to have her feelings stirred. The unselfishness which a sincere love begets made him feel all this, and restrict his talk to what might amuse or soothe her : and he succeeded very well. Even with Leo and Evelyn Westmorland riding always before—with their backs to study, their movements to watch—to see without looking, every time that his hand was outstretched to correct her holding of the reins, his head turned to speak to her or to point out something

ahead—even with all this to be borne, Hope's mood was softened and alleviated by his attentive kindness.

But Tom was not going to stand this long ; he felt himself supplanted, and, like all boys of his age, he could be very annoying if he chose. To separate Hope and Greville was his object, and, for a time, he did not see how to accomplish it ; riding with them on Hope's other side was no use, for he was too emphatically number three. Such also was the case if he tried to attach himself to Leo and the Major, or to his sister and Dr. Forde. It was exceedingly mortifying ; Mollie was the only person who seemed to have leisure to take any notice of him. It made him very wroth.

‘ He would never have come to Leaming,’ he told himself, angrily, ‘ if he had known all this spooning was going to be the result. He had thought that Hope

and Muriel were sensible, and despised such nonsense ;' and he cast various withering glances at his fickle fair one, which she was too heavy-hearted to notice.

And now, at last, they reached the river valley. Quite unexpectedly they turned a corner, and caught a view of a deep gorge, of cool shady woods and granite heights, purple with their glory of heather. Now for the first time they heard the roar of the great falls, hidden as yet from view by many windings of the valley.

'We generally dismount here,' said Mollie, wheeling round, 'and fasten up the horses ; the way down to the falls is so steep and full of loose stones.'

It was a work of some little time to make fast all the steeds, but it was at last accomplished, and then they started on their downward path. Firstly, through a larch-wood, the sun glinting down in pale rays among the stems ; for a mist seemed to be

eclipsing its brightness, and the air was heavy and oppressive. Next, across an old stone bridge, built by the monks of a by-gone day, under which the shallow torrent rushed musically, broken by huge mossy boulders tufted with delicate fern. Now height after height of heather and granite rose around them, and they wound their way in and out among the loose rocks on the shores of the stream. Presently a point was reached too steep for the ladies to jump down without assistance.

Evelyn, who was in front, lifted down Leo, and then Miss Saxon. Close behind her came Hope, who did not see who waited below to perform the kindly office until she stood in the narrow gap, with her hands outstretched. It was her first chance that day to fling back the glove in his face, and she took it. With great calmness, she turned her back upon him, and said, just loud enough for him to hear,

‘Tom, are you there? I want you to jump me down.’

Tom bustled forward delightedly, jumped down himself, so suddenly as almost to upset Major Westmorland, and then turned to Hope.

‘Now, then, duckie!’ he cried, delightedly.

Down floated Hope, as lightly as a leaf, her slender body scarcely seeming to rest any of its weight upon him. Then, gathering up her habit,

‘Race me to that tree, Tom!’ she gaily cried; and away they both darted, distancing all the rest of the party, and arriving first at the Rushing Ghyl.

All heart-burnings, all jealousy, all hatred seemed thrown into the background by the majesty of the beautiful column of translucent water, green and gleaming with the light which transfused it at the top, sinking under their feet into an abyss of dark-

ness, from which arose a mighty roaring, and a cloud of white, dust-like spray.

Hope leaned silently against a projecting piece of granite, and gave herself up to contemplation. Here, night and day, unseen, unheard, far beyond reach of the cockney tourist, it 'thundered on the everlasting hills,' doing its portion of work for the world, unweary, uncomplaining, grand in its solitude, purity, and awfulness. No one spoke, for no one's voice could be heard in the rushing of the falls. Unceasingly they flowed on—the generous tribute of life, fertility, and abundance sent by the hills to the valleys, their sisters. Into Hope's mind came familiar words, invested with a new meaning.

'They go up as high as the hills, and down to the valleys beneath; even unto the place which Thou hast appointed for them.'

And surely, if every runnel which

trickled in the moss had its appointed bourne, and its work which it was created to do, then there was work and a place in the world for Hope Merrion—there must be !

At last Muriel came up, and broke into her reverie by shouting in her ear,

‘ Mollie thinks we ought to be moving—the storm is coming up so fast.’

She raised her eyes then to the sky, lurid and overcast.

‘ What a pity !’ she sighed, as she turned reluctantly away.

Greville joined her as soon as they were far enough from the vociferous waterfall to make his voice audible.

‘ You appeared very grave just now as you stood looking at the Ghyl,’ said he.

‘ I was thinking seriously,’ she replied, frankly. ‘ I can be serious—even I—now and then, you know.’

‘ Of course,’ he said, hastily, ‘ else you

were not the true woman I take you to be.'

'There is something in those falls which impressed me,' she said.

'Or was it partly something in your mind to which the grandeur of nature responded?' suggested he. 'You know, sometimes, our impressions of things vary greatly, according to the frame of mind in which we approach them.'

'I know,' she answered.

Greville felt that he had made a beginning, however small. He had spoken to her of herself and her feelings, and she had not turned it off, nor answered lightly, nor seemed offended. He would have liked to say more, but the turn of the path showed them to be in sight of the horses, and he must perforce wait until they were mounted again. As they halted to watch the others come up, a low mutter of thunder reverberated among the hills, and

Mollie, stepping out into the open, anxiously surveyed the threatening heavens.

‘I am considering,’ he said, ‘whether it would be wiser to get into the shelter of the woods here until the storm is gone by; it seems to be coming up so exceedingly rapidly.’

‘There would be better shelter under the hanging Tor, wouldn’t there?’ suggested Tom. ‘We should have plenty of time to ride there, and we could protect the horses much better.’

‘A good thought, Tom; I fancy that is the best thing we can do. Mount is the order, then.’

This little debate had been unheard by Greville, who was busy putting Hope on her horse, and she was already in the saddle. As soon as she was seated, he walked off to fetch his own horse, which was fastened at some little distance. The animal had somehow contrived to get the

reins entangled round a broken branch of the tree to which it was tethered, and it took Greville some few minutes to extricate it.

Major Westmorland had just liberated his fine hunter, when, in an instant, the whole sky was opened with a fearfully vivid flash of forked lightning, and, crashing immediately upon it, a roll of such thunder as is only to be heard among the hills.

Hope, totally unprepared, started violently; Peony, mad with fear, reared—trembling and snorting. Her rider, barely seated, had not had time to take a firm grasp of the reins; she dropped her whip, and, before she could recover herself, the irritable mare was off—off, almost as swiftly as the sudden flash itself—disappearing with her young rider instantaneously from view among the windings of the hills.

Evelyn was in the saddle at the same

moment. The soldier, used to ride bare-backed, stirrupless, every possible way—did not hesitate for a single second. His hunter and himself were both as fresh as when they started, and it seemed as if, with miraculous quickness, the horse seized the intention of its rider, and was gone!

Like the winged steeds of Walküre, these two had flashed from sight and vanished. When Tom, wild with excitement, rushed on foot round the sharp bend to the left, behind which they had disappeared, there was no sign of either to be seen, only the lowering moor in its dark, desolate silence, and leaving on its springy turf no trace of the fugitives' feet.

CHAPTER IX.

A LAND NOT INHABITED.

We two stood there, with never a third,
But each by each, as each knew well.

ROBERT BROWNING.

‘To horse! to horse!’ shouted Tom. ‘A pursuit, a capture! Hurry, Greville, Forde, Mollie! Let us overtake them!’

‘Oh, yes! Go! go! Muriel and I will not mind being left!’ burst out Leo. ‘Oh, be quick! be quick!’

‘But in which direction?’ cried Greville, ashy pale, as at last he adjusted, bungling in his frantic haste, the misplaced bit, and galloped a little forward.

‘God knows!’ cried Mollie. ‘I only

pray the Major was in time to see which way she went.'

'We will have a try, at all events,' said Greville, between his teeth ; and he started off at the fastest pace his horse, a very sober-minded hack, could be induced to adopt.

Tom and Forde followed him, Mollie remaining to guide the girls safely to the hanging Tor, in view of the now imminent rain.

And Hope rushed onward, into the forsaken regions she feared so much—into the black shadows of the land not inhabited.

Peal after peal of thunder echoed in the hills, flash after flash of lightning terrified the frantic mare afresh. The young girl, motionless, upright in the saddle, holding the reins with a grip which was pain,—the moist air, heavy with coming rain, whistling bleakly past her,—wondered where it would end.

It would all be over soon—how ? where ?

How long had she been rushing along so madly? A moment? A life-time? Was death near? was the knot of her difficulties to be cut like this?

The events of her life—of last year—of last week, seemed to be ranged before her. How fast her life had passed! How little she had done in it! And how trivial and small everything seemed, which was so apparently important. Could nothing stop her? Was no one near?

She began to sway in the saddle.

What was that, gleaming before her, on the ground, a long way off, white and pallid? A line of white chalk? A road? A *river*? Yes, that last. It was much nearer now. It grew wider, and more terrible.

It was the river fed by Rushing Ghyl. That torrent by which she had stood and watched—those clear waters she had admired! They were the waters that were to drown her.

Did she want to die? she hardly knew; she was too unnerved, too nearly unconscious, to think even of trying to turn the mare's head. She strove to pray. A shout, a cry behind her; she was too confused to catch the words.

A rush of vehement hoofs on the turf.

Then something dark and swift shot up abreast of them, a hand snatched at the bridle; there was a violent swerve, a jolt which unseated the fainting girl in an instant, and after that, it came, the sensation Hope dreaded so acutely, the horrible consciousness of being hurled out into space, the sickening thud of limbs falling in a confused heap on the turf; and a loud singing in the ears blotted out, for a minute, all other sounds.

A weight, which had rested on her feet, was moved away. She stirred a little, but a pain in her head shot so sharply through it that she sank back again, and closed her

eyes. She might as well die so, she dimly thought, out on the savage, storm-beaten hill-side, her cheek upon the thymy grass. Everything was quiet. No peal of thunder sounded. She moved her hands together, to say a prayer before she died. She was not unconscious, yet she felt as if she could not move, and considered whether her back or her neck were broken, as she had heard that, in such a case, one suffers little pain.

Something cool touched her forehead, some cold, wet application was made several times across her brow and temples; surely a human hand must be near—she would not have to die quite alone.

She opened her great eyes; pathetic and dark they seemed, in her small wan face, to the excited man bending over her.

She looked up. They were Evelyn Westmorland's dark features which met her view; and in an instant all her dor-

mant vitality was awake, her eyes blazed, the blood rushed to her cheeks, and with a determined struggle she rose—first to her knees, then to her feet, and managed to stagger several steps away from him in vehement haste, to a low stone wall near, on which she rested her hand to support herself, and gasped for breath.

She was alive, no great injury had been done, limbs and spine were certainly intact ; she felt only a great faintness, an unsteady heaving of the grim frowning heavens and bare ground around her and the hateful consciousness of the presence of this enemy, this man who had insulted her.

She found her voice.

‘Tom!’ she cried, pitifully. ‘Tom! Oh, Mollie! Muriel! Tom! Come here to me! I am all alone!’

The terrified accents were drowned by another terrific crash of thunder; the steelly gleam of the lightning lit up the

turgid surface of the stream; and there was a mad rush of hoofs on the hollow, reverberating ground.

Evelyn started. Peony was off, beyond all hope of re-capture. He had pulled her in so violently as to cause her to swerve, and, her foot coming in contact with a large loose stone, she had stumbled, shooting her rider over her head. This part of the hill-side was covered with scattered stones, crumbled from a low ruined wall, and, when Peony got up, he saw that both knees were badly cut. This inspired him with a new terror: if Hope's head should have come in violent contact with such a stone!

Peony was so trembling, so meek and depressed by her fright that he had led her to one side, and left her standing, head drooped, and sweating sides, and, with no further delay, abandoned himself to the task of attending Miss Merrion.

Now she was gone. On the whole, perhaps it was as well. They would have been obliged to lead her, and, terrified as she was by the thunder, she might have been an emphatic hindrance. But her departure roused him to look at his own horse, which stood, however, obediently where he had left it, its bridle hitched to a projecting stone on the top of the wall. It raised its head, and, with distended nostrils, sniffed the air and trembled, but it remained quiet.

He had never in his life felt so agitated, so perplexed, so stirred, through and through, as at this moment. It had not struck him, as it might have done, that Hope Merrion would infallibly reject any overtures of help from him. His own forced coldness had so instantly deserted him at sight of her peril—his long-stifled fierce heart had flamed up so vigorously—he had so bent all his indomitable will, all

his terrible persistency on the idea of serving her at all risks, that he had well-nigh forgotten the feud that existed between them.

When her glorious eyes opened upon his, the expression she had seen there had been one of passionate thankfulness. Fool that he was! Thrice fool! He had burnt his ships. Poor wretch! by offering her that one marked, gratuitous insult, the intention of which could not be mistaken, he had thought to end it all at one blow: because, to have her standing there in the moonlight, holding out her hand, had been torture too desperate, too acute for him to bear. Loyalty to his betrothed, loyalty to his particular friend,—how was it to be kept if Hope and he were reconciled?

And so he had done it, and so he had gained this satisfaction of having wantonly deprived himself of the right to help

her, of the right even to offer her the common services of humanity. She recoiled from him as from one unworthy to touch her: and it was only what he might have expected.

Well, the others would be up directly; he could resign her alive, and not much hurt, into the hands of those she loved; only all his life long he could hug to his heart the blessed consciousness of having saved her, of having been quickest of all those there to follow her: no one could rob him of that satisfaction.

He went up to his horse, patted it and soothed it, with one eye on the gap between the ridges, where every moment he expected to see some of the party appear, the other on the forlorn little figure seated bare-headed on the low wall, her face hidden in her hands.

He could not bear the sight; physically, it hurt him to see her there, so weak, so

in need of help, and yet divided from him by so impassable a barrier.

He strode up to her.

‘Miss Merrion, are you hurt?’

No answer.

‘Do you feel pain anywhere?’

Still no reply.

‘For God’s sake speak to me!’ he cried, suddenly breaking out, words seeming to rush to his lips without his own will. ‘Curse me, if you want to, but say something,—tell me if you feel pain.’

She moved her hands away from her white face. Oh, God! how it went to his heart, that iron compression of the sweet little mouth!

‘Go away,’ she said, with her eyes blazing upon him. ‘I would rather die alone here than have you with me.’

‘Would you?’ he said, recoiling with a start, and he put his hand over his eyes, —‘would you? Oh, my God!’

There was a moment's pause, then again the cloud was rent, and again the artillery of heaven rattled in the hills. The first great heavy drops of the rain that was coming were dashed in Evelyn's haggard face. No time was to be lost, he must get her sheltered somehow, somewhere, if not with her will, then against it; and, as he mentally measured his strength against hers, he smiled.

Hastily he looked along the way he had come: there was no sign of any human thing approaching. At the top of his speed he ran to the summit of the ridge on whose slope they stood, and gazed around. The sight was terrible. Purple masses of swollen cloud dragged themselves over the bosom of the moor, shutting out the distances altogether: no living creature was in sight; at about a mile's distance he could see that it was already raining with tropical fury, and bearing down upon them.

with frightful speed. The drops stood out on his forehead as he wondered what on earth he was to do to shelter her. To be drenched through, so many miles from all hope of being able to dry or change her clothes, might kill her.

Ah! it was not over yet. It was still his mission, his glorious privilege to take care of her. Even in all his perplexity, anxiety, agony of mind, he had leisure to revel in the grand thought that, in her dire need; she was absolutely dependent upon him. The thought was life. It seemed to inspire him with the courage, strength, wits of twenty men.

As his keen eyes flashed round their inquiring glances on all hands, he spied something which, in the strange gloom, looked like a bit of ruined castle—a piece of crumbling masonry in grey stone. Whatever it was, there was more hope of shelter there than on the open hillside. To

get her there was the immediate thing to do. He was at her side in far less time than it takes to tell it.

‘The rain is coming,’ he said, panting; ‘we must shelter till it is over. Come this way, or you will be wet through.’

‘I will go nowhere with you,’ she cried, recoiling from him. ‘If you really wanted to help me, you would try to find one of *my friends*, instead of insulting me by forcing yourself upon me.’

‘There is nobody to be seen, far or near,’ said Evelyn, decisively. ‘They are probably taking shelter from the storm, and so must you. I don’t care whether you like it or not—you must come with me.’

‘I will not!’ she cried, in real fear; ‘I will be drenched to the skin first! Go away and leave me!’

The heavy rain dashed in her lovely, wilful face. Evelyn’s eyes grew very bright; he pulled off his rough tweed coat.

‘You will put this on,’ he said to her, calmly.

‘I will not—I will not stir! *I hate you!*’

‘I daresay,’ he answered, between his teeth, ‘I daresay you do; but you *shall* do as I tell you. I am stronger than you, and I will make you do it.’

In a moment the coat was on her, she scarcely knew how: a cap, which he pulled from the pocket of it, covered her bare head, and then he caught her hand and ran. Outraged pride, fury, fear made her gasp, and sob, and tremble. On they ran, down the hill, towards the building, the situation of which Evelyn had clearly noted.

Lo! between it and them flowed a shallow brooklet, which fed the stream lower down. He was in a mood not to be hindered now. He caught Hope in his arms, waded warily through the water, and dashed up the ascent on the other side. Nor

did he pause until he had entered the ruined cottage, for such it proved to be, and could set her down upon a dry floor, with a tolerably sound roof over her head.

He rested against the wall a moment, panting for breath, but was instantly aroused by the expression of Hope's face. He had set her gently on her feet, for he could not lay her down on the bare floor of beaten earth; but she seemed as if bewildered, or not knowing where she was. She stretched out her hands, groping as for support. He started forward and caught her just in time, for everything was swimming round her, and she clutched his shirt-sleeve involuntarily, even while crying, excitedly,

'Lay me down—lay me down on the floor!'

He did so, with a stone for a pillow. Tenderly he let the little curly head rest

upon it, and arranged her with as little discomfort as possible.

‘You will not be afraid of being left alone a few minutes? I want to fetch my horse,’ he whispered.

She shook her head.

‘You will stay here while I go?’

‘Yes.’

He rose, and went out into the deluge. The rain was literally tearing up the smoking ground in its fury. Gatered though he was, his boots were already full of water from wading the brook. In another minute he had not one dry thread upon him. He cared nothing at all about it; his veins were filled with a new fire, his heart with a great strength. He ran as though he had wings to his feet, till he reached the place where stood the patient hunter, presenting a truly dismal appearance in his dripping condition. Springing on his back,

Evelyn galloped him through the brook, and tethered him safely in the other room of the cottage, the roof of which was still water-tight in places.

He busied himself for awhile with taking off the saddle, and giving the horse a scrape down with a bit of rusty iron which he found. Then he made a somewhat abortive attempt to dry his own short, dark locks with a pocket handkerchief, as the water which continually trickled down his forehead, and dripped from the tip of his nose, impeded the distinctness of his vision.

He glanced through the open doorway at the motionless girl on the ground, gave himself a vigorous shake or two, and wondered what he had better do next.

The first move was to consult his watch, and his relief was great when he saw that it was only a quarter to four. It was not

dusk till seven—three hours of day-light were before them, so he judged it might be safe to wait half-an-hour, at least, to give the thunder and rain a chance of abating.

He felt decidedly anxious, for he did not know in the least where they were. Mollie's shooting lay in quite a different direction, and he had never, till that day, been anywhere near Rushing Ghyl; however, from that point he did not doubt being able to find his way home, and thought it more than likely that the party they had lost would shelter somewhere near, and await their return. The difficulty was, to get back to the place whence Peony had started on her wild career. In the headlong haste of his pursuit, he had scarcely noticed the direction taken, nor could he recall any landmarks which they had passed. Every faculty had been so concentrated on the

safety of the girl before him, he had heeded nothing else, nor had he ever doubted that some of the others were following him. On reflection, he had no idea of the distance traversed, nor of the time taken to get over the ground. It had seemed a very long way; but, as it was still so early, he was forced to believe that they could not have come so far as he had imagined. There was still a chance that one of the others might succeed in finding them; failing that, a sudden hopeful thought darted into his mind—there was the river! According to all his calculations, this must be the stream which flowed from Rushing Ghyl; they had, therefore, only to follow it upwards, to arrive, sooner or later, at the point whence they started. Certainly, under these circumstances, they could afford to give the weather a chance of mending. It must be a terrible risk to expose any girl to the

present rain—less only, he decided, than the risk of being overtaken by total darkness in an unknown country. There was no moon, as he knew.

The idea of mounting, and riding up the river bank to join the others, and tell them of her safety, now occurred to him. Dare he leave her—his charge—in such a wild, lonely, unfriendly spot? He hardly knew.

Approaching the doorway, he looked in again upon her. His heart ached for her, he knew that she ought to be warmed, fed, and comforted, and he was so powerless to do either; he wished he were one of those thoughtful men who always carry about a brandy flask, for contingencies.

As he gazed upon her, all the tenderness of his whole nature kindled, he detected a slight shaking of the shoulders, and the sound of a suppressed sob. He could

stand it no longer. Venturing in, he knelt down beside her, and gently drew away her hands from her face.

CHAPTER X.

IT GROWS DARK.

A moment after, and hands unseen
Were hanging the night around us fast.

ROBERT BROWNING.

‘WHY are you so unhappy?’ he asked, pleadingly.

‘Oh, go away! Please go away,’ was her bitter, sobbing cry.

‘I can’t! I will not!’ he asserted, mutinously, ‘don’t ask me to leave you. I swear I will not speak to you, if that distresses you—only let me be near you, and ready at a moment’s notice to render you any service you may need.’

‘Don’t touch me!’ she said, moving further from him. ‘To be left alone is all I ask. I cannot bear you to be near me. Go as far away as you can.’

‘Out into the storm?’ he asked, bitterly.

‘Oh, no,’ she said, ‘not that!’ and after a little pause, ‘no, not that—I am too selfish.’

‘What had I to expect?’ he groaned. ‘It is right you should treat me like a brute. I accept my punishment; you are just.’

He rose from her side and moved away. His very soul seemed scorched with the yearning, the craving which possessed him to speak out—to give her her revenge, to tell her the biter was bit, and that he loved her.

Loved her?

Not till now had he owned it to himself in straightforward words. Loved her? Rather, he worshipped her! Oh, to tell

her so! To be free to go and cast his homage, manhood, life, strength, all he had, or was, at the feet of the little humbled weak creature who lay there so still, so sad!

The variety of conflicting feeling which surged up in his heart maddened him. He no longer tried to struggle against this overmastering love, nor to deny it. He could only, as it were, stand face to face with it, regarding it with a mixture of horror and a new secret joy.

He loved her, but his traitor tongue must never tell her so; he was not free, but bound. He had forced a promise—a confession of love—from innocent Leo, and he was no longer his own, but hers.

And so she, this Hope—whom he had so injured and so adored—must lie and weep upon the ground; he might not lift her tender body from the hard earth, nor rest her weary little head, with its soft, damp,

brown curls, against what seemed its natural resting-place—his heart. But oh! he cried out in his blind folly, might they not be friends?

Ah! she too had wished to be friends; and her little modest effort towards reconciliation had been met with insult. His misery was approaching a climax. He was standing before the forsaken hearthstone, overgrown with white flowering nettles. On their coarse leaves fell heavily two drops which had never come from the skies. He started, moved to the broken, crumbling window-sill, knelt on the floor, and hid his face in his hands; his broad shoulders shook with the passions which rent him.

He had never been able to understand men being in love; and now it appeared as if that injured divinity were determined to give so presumptuous a mortal a taste of his sovereign might. It seemed as if in-

visible cords were drawing him, invisible hands urging him, to fling his honour to the winds, to forget Leo Forde, to tell Hope Merrion that he loved her. He was obliged to grasp the rough stones with his hands to keep back the torrent of words which rushed to his lips, the great cry of his long stifled heart.

He prayed silently. The paroxysm passed away; the soldier returned to his duty. She was here, in his care, this tender, defenceless girl. He was bound, by every claim of manliness and chivalry, to keep his own feelings in the background, whatever they might be, to think only of her:

He was roused from his reverie by a startled cry

‘Major Westmorland! Major Westmorland! Are you gone?’

He was on his feet in an instant.

‘No, no! I am here—not so far off.’

‘Oh, I was afraid you had gone away and left me alone!’

‘Not quite such a brute as that,’ he said, huskily.

She raised herself painfully on one arm.

‘Oh, I am so stiff—I ache so.’

‘I would have made you more comfortable if you would have allowed me,’ he suggested, humbly. ‘Will you not let me try?’

‘Help me to stand up, please.’

He did so, his heart throbbing excitedly as he raised her. She seemed unable to support all her weight at first, but, after a minute, disengaged herself from him and walked to the window.

‘How fast it rains!’ she said; ‘but I am better—well again now. I think we ought to find the others; where are we, do you know?’

‘I have a pretty fair idea,’ he said, speaking as encouragingly as he could to

console her. 'I think I can take you back to—your friends in safety. I fancy they will, if possible, remain in the vicinity of Rushing Ghyll—I heard them speak, just before your mare bolted, of a place near where there was shelter; and they probably feel that we shall be more likely to meet there than wandering about in the moor.'

As he spoke, he came a little nearer to where she stood, and he saw her flinch. The hot colour tingled in his face; she was indeed avenging her wrongs with pitiless rigour.

'You say,' he resumed, after a pause of deep mortification, 'that you feel better? You think you are not much hurt?'

'I am sure I am not hurt at all. I feel—all right,' she said weakly, but determinedly. 'Oh, why will not this rain cease?' she added, wringing together her hands feverishly, and standing with her back to him.

‘I think, as you find my company so intolerable, that it will be best for me to take my horse, leave you here, and ride to Rushing Ghyl to fetch one of your—friends. I am sure I can find the way.’

‘If you will be so kind, I think it will be best,’ she answered, with dignity.

With swelling heart he went into the next room and returned, carrying his saddle. Near the wall, in the most sheltered part of the mean, draughty place, was a heap of stones. Arranging these with some care in the form of a seat, he placed the saddle upon them upside down.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘I think, if you will sit here, you will be as comfortable as I can make you. I will arrange some stones as a footstool for you.’

Turning slowly, she looked first at his arrangements then at him, hesitatingly.

‘But you—you will have no saddle,’ she faltered.

‘It makes no difference to me,’ he replied, in a hard voice.

The fire, the strength which had inspired him, had all died down, leaving him weary, stiff, and cold ; his features, always decided, looked very set and haggard. He stepped, rather ostentatiously, as far from her as he could, and waited. She was feeling so weak that any kind of seat was inviting to her eyes ; she crept towards it and sat down.

Kneeling before her, he arranged some stones to keep her feet from the cold floor, and then rose.

‘I shall be as quick as I can ; good-bye,’ he said.

‘Good-bye,’ she replied, not looking at him.

And then it seemed too cruel, too rude to let him go like this—without a ‘Thank you.’ Whatever it cost her, she must say something.

‘Major Westmorland——’

He turned, about to enter the other room, and waited in the doorway.

‘I want to thank you.’

‘Oh—what for?’ he asked, grimly.

‘What you have done for me——’

‘Nonsense. I would rather hear you say something else,’—his great chest heaved—‘rather hear you forgive me than thank me . . . But you won’t do that!’

‘I think,’ she said, very unsteadily, ‘that you have earned forgiveness: see here . . . the very coat off your back! Could Christian charity go further?’

For a moment his grey eyes lighted up with a wonderful new gleam; then once more the light sank out of them.

‘Ah!’ he said, sadly, ‘the score you have against me can’t be wiped out so easily. I’m not such a fool as to think so; but, all the same, thanks for speaking kindly to me—it is more than I deserve.’

He turned away too suddenly to see the rush of tears in her eyes.

Afraid to trust himself a moment longer, he hurriedly let his horse loose, and led it out of the cottage,—not without difficulty, the doorway was so low.

Just as he was mounted and turning away, a cry recalled him. Looking back, he saw Hope in the doorway, beckoning him to stop. He rode up to her.

‘You must not go,’ she said, trembling, half-crying. ‘I don’t know how it is, nor why I should be so foolish, but I cannot be left alone—not all alone! I don’t like to have you here, but I cannot bear to have you go! . . . What am I saying? Yes, go! Go, of course! Take no notice of what I say—you must go!’

The rain pelted down upon him as he sat, coatless, on the bare-backed horse, before this inconsiderate young woman.

‘Am I to go or stay? I wait your orders,’ he said.

‘Stay!’ she cried, after a short struggle, and, turning, ran back to the cottage, sinking upon the seat he had provided.

He patiently dismounted once more, shaking the rain from his clothes, and indulging vehemently in a few arm exercises by way of keeping up the circulation. Then he went and stood as close as he could to the horse’s warm side, and leaned his arm upon it.

His eyes looked wearily out upon the desolate, dripping prospect and saturated ground. It was pouring so fast that he believed it must soon abate. A little longer waiting was his portion; yet he felt that it would have been wiser to go.

It seemed to him as though thoughts, hopes, desires, regrets, mad longings were crowded into these moments, enough to

last him all his weary future life through. His life had been so uneventful! never happy, but never miserable. His father's hardly veiled scorn of his character and attainments, joined to a disposition sensitive and shrinking, and a want of self-assertion almost criminal, had caused him always, as a matter of course, to take a back seat everywhere. He had escaped the disagreeables which always result to a more impulsive, active spirit, but he had also missed the pleasures. He had, in truth, never felt very violently about anything or anybody, until he met Miss Merrion. He knew now, that it was her strange, unexpected, undeniable power to make him *feel* which had inspired him with so hot an antagonism. Into the man's very soul these unfathomable eyes had pierced. They had awakened sensations which he never knew he possessed. The very sound of her voice, the very sight of her slight

figure, leaning daintily back in a basket chair, even the scent of the violets she nearly always wore, seemed to touch new springs of being, to show him new possibilities of a happiness he had sometimes vaguely longed for, but never seriously believed in.

Well! Even in the depths of his miserable consciousness that in some way his life was going horridly wrong, even in the throes of the wonderful new knowledge that he could, and did love, desperately and passionately—the man's long cherished self-control stood him in good stead. He faced the future resolutely.

He loved a woman who did not love him—who shrank from his touch, even from his presence in her sight.

Very good: that love should and must be utterly crushed. He could do it, and would do it, at whatever cost. His whole life, thoughts, and cares should be given to

the girl who was to be his wife. To-day's brief mutiny of thought should be trampled ruthlessly out of existence. To do his duty had always seemed so simply, obviously right: was he to shrink now because such duty was hard? He—a soldier?

He lifted his face again from where he had hidden it, in his horse's neck. The aspect of the weather alarmed him greatly.

The character of the rain had changed, from streaming thunder torrents to a quiet, steady downpour. All around them the sky had closed in to a uniform leaden hue. It looked like a wet night.

Moreover, it was growing so dark. Had he not known otherwise, he would almost have imagined that the dusk was falling. He snatched out his watch, and his heart seemed to jump to his throat as he did so.

It was the same time as when he last looked at it—a quarter to four.

It had stopped, of course !

He bitterly called himself a fool, an arrant fool, not to suspect that it must be wrong, when he looked at it first ; he might have known, by the time they started, that it could not possibly have been so early. Thinking over it again, he came to the conclusion that it must have been five o'clock at least when he first consulted it. It was now, then, almost six. In an hour it would be quite dark.

The perspiration stood on his forehead. After all his resolutions to take care of her, he had played the fool, he told himself, and allowed his own feelings to make him forgetful.

Rain or no rain, they must start at once now, or she would have to pass the night in that horrible place.

‘Oh, that I may only be able to get her to Rushing Ghyl in safety!’ he cried, in an agony, to his own heart, as he entered the other room.

Hope was sitting with her chin resting in her hands, her eyes fixed on the ground.

‘We must start at once,’ he hurriedly said, ‘rain or not. It is growing so late.’

She struggled to her feet, evidently stiff and bruised, but faced him pluckily.

‘It is later than I thought,’ he confessed, hurriedly. ‘My watch had stopped.’

‘Is it growing dark?’ she asked, apprehensively.

‘I am afraid so,’ faltered he, looking at her with a world of self-reproach in his great grey eyes.

She caught the look and tone, and going up to him, held out her hand.

‘I am not afraid,’ said she, simply.

So, for the first time, Hope Merrion and Evelyn Westmorland clasped hands.

Neither spoke, nor did he dare to hold his treasure long. Reverently he let it go, and in an instant was re-saddling the hunter, with new energy in his movements, new life in his heart.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW THEY PARTED.

A turn, and we stand in the heart of things ;
The woods are around us, heaped and dim.

ROBERT BROWNING.

THE sudden presence of great anxiety made a difference in the Major's feelings, did away with self-consciousness. He simply wrapped Hope up as if she were six years old, and he her nurse ; tying the cloth-cap on her head by means of his handkerchief which he fastened in a bow under her chin, buttoning his coat tightly round her and turning up the collar.

‘ Oh, Major Westmorland, do take your

coat,' she pleaded, 'you will catch your death!'

'Nothing of the kind,' he replied, shortly, as he led her out into the rainy twilight, and lifted her upon the tall hunter.

'You can manage without the pommel?' he asked.

'Yes, oh, yes, I think so.'

He lifted his face a moment to her, when she was mounted.

'Keep up your spirits; please God, I'll bring you home safely,' he said, earnestly.

'You are very good to me,' she answered, humbly.

He set his face like a flint, and they went forward. The outlook might have depressed the stoutest heart. So low did the clouds hang that they could only see quite a short way in front of them; the rain still fell fast, and the ground was like a sponge.

Evelyn went doggedly ahead. He was obliged to keep quite near the stream, and

it soon became apparent that it wound in and out most tediously ; moreover, the point for which Peony had made, appeared to be the only bit where the banks were not steep. This involved a continual and most tiring scrambling up hills and down again, much of which, he thought, they might have avoided, had he been able to see further before him.

However, on he went, as fast as he could move over the heavy, soaked ground, spurred on by a terrible anxiety, running a race with the approaching night. To converse was impossible, only every now and then he turned up his face to ask the question,

‘ Are you all right ? ’

To which the brave voice answered at once,

‘ Yes, all right, thank you. ’

At the end of half-an-hour, to Evelyn’s thankfulness, a slight increase in the light

was apparent, the clouds seemed to be less dense. Part of the low trailing vapours swept away, revealing before them an apparently endless waste of dull, monotonous frowning moor. The rain also did not fall so heavily.

‘Courage!’ he said, cheerily, ‘it is going to clear!’

The hope was illusive. Another canopy of cloud swept over the brighter space, and brought fresh rain with it. The dusk fell deeper and deeper, and Evelyn began to grow frantic.

What was he to do? What plan could he possibly think of, to shelter and protect his treasure? His mind was torn with conflicting thoughts—would it have been wiser to remain where they were, after all? Might they not wander all night in this waste howling wilderness, with the rain dripping on their heads?

How much more could she bear? Women were so tender, he knew.

At this point the horse put his foot into a hole, and stumbled. The light was so bad that Evelyn could not see where he was treading; he foresaw that, in half-an-hour, they would be wrapped in the utter gloom of a rainy, moonless night.

He almost thought it must be a nightmare, from which he should awake soon, so strange, so improbable did the whole matter appear.

That Hope and he should have become so utterly cut off and separated from their fellows; that this fearful storm should have immediately followed; that his watch, usually entirely to be relied upon, should stop to-day of all days!

He was at his wit's end. To all appearance, they were as far from the bridge whence they had started, as ever; and they had been hurrying along for an hour

mostly at a jog-trot. They must have covered nearly five miles.

They mounted, as his reflections reached this pitch, to the top of a pretty steep hillock, and he saw, as soon as he gained the summit, that about a hundred yards ahead the river emerged from a thick, dark wood.

Here, indeed, the darkness would be profound; yet to enter this wood seemed the only thing to do, for lose sight of the water he dared not, and the extent of the plantation seemed considerable—it reached as far as the gathering obscurity allowed his eye to follow it.

On gaining the spot, a ray of hope kindled in his heart; for he at once saw that there was a tolerably well-trodden foot-path under the trees, near the river's side. Moreover, so thick were the branches above that very little rain penetrated, and he was able to unscrew his aching features,

distorted with an hour's fruitless endeavouring to see with his eyes shut.

‘Are you afraid?’ he asked, in a low voice, as the little cavalcade plunged into the shadows.

‘No,’ replied the low, stedfast voice, ‘not with you.’

The strength of those words urged him on for a quarter-of-an-hour in patient discomfort, feeling his way in darkness which grew continually darker. The path and the stream parted company, the path striking into the woods, and the trees growing so thickly each side of it that to forsake the track and plunge into the wood seemed likely to be almost impossible.

There was nothing for it but to follow this path, he thought—it must lead somewhere.

Hope saw that he halted.

‘You are very tired,’ said she, gently.

‘Oh! not tired—not tired, only so non-

plussed,' he said, in most depressed accents.

'What are we to do?'

'You must follow the path,' she said; 'it must bring us out somewhere. Courage a little longer.'

He went on without another word; and in about ten minutes his anxiously peering eyes saw a sight which made him cry aloud in the excess of his relief,

'Thank God! There's a light!'

'A light?' cried Hope, tremulously. 'Oh, yes! I see it;' and she began to shed a few tears out of sheer weakness.

They hastened onwards, with hearts too full for further speech, towards the friendly ray. As they drew nearer, the trees grew less dense, and presently, in the midst of a small clearing, they stumbled on what seemed to the bewildered Major more like an Esquimaux village than anything he had ever seen. A collection of six mounds made of earth and boughs of

trees placed close together, the tallest not as high as Evelyn's head, and the whole railed in by a roughly constructed fence. From the open entrance of one of these came the light of a lamp and the glow of a coke fire. Three or four children of various ages stood about, apparently watching some culinary operation; a woman stooped over the fire.

‘Well, I’ll be shot!’ cried the Major, as he beheld this scene. ‘What on earth is it?’

They were charcoal-burners’ huts; but, oddly enough, he had never seen such things. Hope had, and she told him what they were.

Meanwhile, the interest of the natives was, of course, strongly excited. Out of the gloom of the pitch-dark evening, a knight, a lady, and a steed suddenly flashed from the dim recesses of the wood. The youngest, to whom the said wood was

doubtless an abode of bogies and other bugbears of a childish imagination, began to whimper.

‘Now, what are you arter with Teddie there, Sam, you varmint?’ said the mother from within.

‘Moder, ’ere’s a lady and a gennleman,’ shrilly cried an elder olive-branch.

‘Don’t tell the childer no lies, ’Lizbeth. I’m ashamed on yer.’

‘Moder, there do be a lady an’ a gennleman on an ’orse, a great big ’orse!’ vociferated Sam, dancing on his bare feet.

The baby set to work to yell at the full pitch of its lungs; the mother rose, and came out of the hovel, bringing her light with her. So thick was the foliage of the trees under which the huts were built that neither rain nor wind could penetrate. She was a woman with a sweet and serious face, and a look of being above her lowly position—clean and fairly neat, as also

were the healthy-looking children, except the goggle-eyed baby, who, after the fashion of his class, was covered with tears and grime.

Evelyn addressed her eagerly.

‘Can you tell me how far we are from Rushing Ghyl? We have lost our way,’ he said, hoarsely.

‘Dear!’ said the woman, with a compassionate look at Hope. ‘It’s about three miles to Rushing Ghyl from here, sir.’

Three miles! And, after that, seven more across the open moor! He dared not risk it.

‘Miss Merrion,’ he said, in a low tone, ‘do you feel as if you could wait a while in this place?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Hope, faintly. ‘I think I must. I—don’t feel as if I could go on any further.’

He touched her hand. It was icy cold.

‘Have you anything to eat or drink?’

he hurriedly asked the woman. 'Any bread? or milk?'

'I've bread, sir, and a drop o' milk; but not more than enough for a cup of tea or so.'

Evelyn lifted Hope from the saddle, and her exhausted head drooped wearily against him.

'She is so wet and cold,' he said. 'Now, children, will you see if you can help the lady?'

'Ay,' said the children, herding gravely in a group, but expressing much goodwill with their eyes.

'Let her sit by the fire, sir,' said the sweet-faced woman; and Evelyn was astonished to see how ingeniously the interlacing boughs lined the hut, and how clean was the interior. There was a chair in the quaint place, and he seated Hope upon it, looking anxiously at her ashy face, with its tendrils of forlorn, wet hair, and dripping cap.

The woman, who could not anyhow have entered the hut while Hope and Evelyn were both inside, produced a rough but clean towel and handed it to the strange gentleman, who thanked her abruptly, and, as he tenderly removed the lady's wet headgear, asked if the kettle boiled.

It did. The woman proved sensible, eager, and helpful. In a very few minutes Hope had swallowed some hot tea and a small piece of bread.

'She's wet through, sir—she did ought to have everything took off of her,' earnestly said their hostess. 'Couldn't you leave her to me, sir?'

Evelyn looked doubtfully at the mean, wretched place; then consideringly at the serene eyes of the speaker.

'See here, sir,' she went on, simply, 'my man ain't home to-night—he's burning over to Rossertleys, and sleeps on the farm. I'll sit up with the lady. I'd just

lighted this bit o' fire to give the childer some hot porridge. That they shall have, and Pollie'll pack 'em all off to bed. Look!' she produced two dark woollen blankets, 'I was washin' all to-day till storm come, and these has been hangin' since yesterday, an' as sweet as moor-breezes can make 'em. I'll bring in my mattress, an' roll 'er in these; she can't do no harm, I don't think, sir.'

Evelyn turned to Hope. She was lying back in her chair with closed lids, and was holding his hand, probably unconscious that she held it. He knelt down by her.

'Miss Merrion!'

Her eyes languidly opened.

'Yes? I hear.'

'Will you stay here with Mrs.—Shepherd? thanks!—with Mrs. Shepherd, while I ride home as fast as horse will carry me to tell them you are safe?'

She fixed her look upon him wistfully.

‘Shall you be gone very long?’ she whispered.

‘I will be as quick as I can—you know I will,’ he said soothingly, his traitor heart leaping for joy. ‘I would not leave you, but I think I must—I ought! It will be nearly three hours before I can get back, I am afraid, as it is a strange road. You will let me go?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good-bye,’ he said. ‘God bless and keep you.’

‘Good-bye,’ she softly sighed; ‘and—and—you *won’t* be long?’

‘I promise not to linger a moment.’

‘Thank you. Please go now.’

He lifted the hand he held, and laid his lips upon it. So much it was impossible to help. Warmly, yet reverently, he kissed it, and laid it down upon her knee as if, with it, he renounced all hope, all happiness.

‘Drink a cup of tea before you go, sir,’ said Mrs. Shepherd.

He shook his head.

‘Keep it for her—make her drink some more,’ he said, unsteadily, as he put on the coat which had been sanctified by containing her little form. ‘Only tell me the nearest way.’

The footpath, she told him, would bring him out upon the high-road leading to the very bridge where they had dismounted. The road was quite straight—he could not miss it. Putting a sovereign into her hand, he mounted again and rode off, feeling as though he left his life behind him.

When he emerged from the wood, stars were visible through rents, here and there, in the clouds. The white road was clearly distinguishable from the dark hedges, and the rain had ceased to fall. He was able to travel at the fastest pace his horse could command.

As he dashed along, the sound of the hoofs crashing in the wet road, he caught sight of two mounted figures, apparently awaiting him at the top of the next hill. Then he heard a shout, which he answered as loud as his hoarseness would permit, and, on riding up, recognized Tom and Greville.

‘Where is she?’ was the cry which broke from both—the only greeting he received, and, as he did not immediately answer, Greville added, ‘Good God!—You found her, surely? You know where she is?’

‘Yes,’ gasped Evelyn, ‘I know where she is.’

‘Not killed! She was not killed?’ cried Tom, in tones that rent the Major’s heart.

‘No, no, Tom, my boy, not killed,’ he hastened to assure him, ‘not even much hurt, as far as I have been able to judge.’

‘Then where is she?’

‘About three miles from here, in a charcoal-burner’s hut,’ he said, wearily. ‘Where have you two come from?’

‘Straight from Leaming,’ answered Tom. ‘Mollie, Greville, and I have been scouring the moor till the dark fell so as to make it impossible to do more; Forde, like a good fellow, took home the girls,—so she is safe! Thank God! But Mollie knew you would take care of her. “She’s safe with Westmorland!” he kept on saying.’

‘Did he?’ said Evelyn, with a sudden gladness, ‘did he say that? But she is terribly exhausted, and has been much exposed to the rain—I did not know what to do for the best. We were sheltered in a ruined cottage.’

‘*What!*’ cried Tom.

‘A ruined cottage near the river.’

‘Why—well!—You mean Peony bolted all that way before you could stop her? We never thought of looking so far as

that! Those are the ruined mines!
What a mercy she did not go down a
shaft!

‘It must be five or six miles from here,
I think?’

‘Quite.’

CHAPTER XII.

SHE HAS COUNTLESS VICTIMS.

Worth how well, those dark grey eyes,
That hair so dark and dear, how worth
That a man should strive, and agonize
And taste a veriest hell on earth
For the hope of such a prize !

R. BROWNING.

So all was over ; Evelyn had resigned his trust, the precious burden of sole responsibility for her safety was his no longer. Tom was for riding on at once to see with his own eyes that she was safe, but the others dissuaded him from this. If Hope was having her things dried, he could not see her ; if she were asleep, she had better

not be disturbed until the carriage was there to take her home. Besides, neither Greville nor Westmorland knew the way back to Leaming without him; Greville, who would have given his eyes to go to her, was entirely at sea in a strange country. The best thing they could all do was to return home as fast as possible, relieve the anxiety of the others, and despatch the carriage at once to bring her back.

On the way, he told a part of their adventures, but his great and increasing hoarseness made it impossible to say much. He was faint and weak with hunger, and his saturated clothes were agonizingly uncomfortable. It seemed to him as if ages passed away during that dark, cold ride. A certain constraint was upon all three men. Tom and Greville, jealous of each other, were yet more earnest in their combined feeling of jealousy of Westmor-

land. To one or other of these two, her special devotees, it was manifest that the rescue of Miss Merrion should have belonged; that it had been given to Westmorland, who cared nothing for Hope, and was undoubtedly on the brink of an engagement to Miss Forde, if not already plighted to her, was, as Greville discontentedly reflected, the unsatisfactory kind of thing which always does happen in real life. How much more dramatic and suitable it would have been, could he have followed and protected her, and so established that claim on her gratitude which would have bestowed so dainty a flavour of romance on their common-place nineteenth century courtship. It was certainly a most perverse fate.

This unexplained feeling of dissatisfaction weighed upon their spirits, and made them silent, only anxious to urge forward their horses, and expedite the

starting of the relief party as soon as possible.

At last the lights of the Manor House appeared, and scarcely had the latch of the drive gate clicked, when the front door was opened, and the four anxious watchers appeared.

Westmorland started guiltily as the lamp-light fell on Leo's pretty, wistful face, it was so long since she had been in his thoughts.

At first, he had scarcely time to greet her, for all his explanations had to be renewed, and the clamour of voices rendered it difficult for anybody to understand anything. The charcoal-burner's settlement was, most fortunately, known to Mr. Lyster; they had been there since the beginning of the summer, and were respectable people. The anxious servants flew to make ready the brougham, and fill it with wraps and restoratives. Peony had arrived

home not an hour before, in a crushed, depressed, and limping state ; they were afraid she would have to be shot. So much Evelyn gathered ; also that Muriel and Leo had ridden home in the pouring rain with Richard Forde, that the others had scoured the moor till nightfall, hurried back to Leaming to see if by any chance Evelyn had brought Hope back, and, finding that nothing had been heard of the missing pair, snatched a mouthful of food, and were off again.

Everyone seemed to be talking at once, the sound of the voices surged almost meaninglessly in the Major's ears ; he felt unequal to describing or explaining himself in any way, he could only reiterate that, so far as the fall was concerned, he did not think that Miss Merrion could be much hurt ; she stood, walked, ran, immediately afterwards.

‘ That is indeed something to be thank-

ful for,' cried poor Mollie, in tones of boundless relief. 'Such an incident, such trouble, such a catastrophe, to spoil the happiness of your visit! and I feel so responsible! Well, Muriel, are you ready to set off? Shall you and I go and fetch Hope back?'

'Oh, Mollie, let me come!' cried poor Tom, in accents of despair; but this was decided against. There was no room for him in the carriage; Mollie would not hear of his going outside, after all the cold and rain to which he had been exposed. Greville felt himself taking an unkind delight in the knowledge that no one else was to be allowed the privilege which he knew he had no right to claim.

'Meanwhile, we are all forgetting Major Westmorland,' said Muriel, as Mollie wrapped her cloak about her. 'Please to take him into the dining-room, Dr. Forde, and

make him eat something, he must be dying of hunger.'

Evelyn stood mute, a troubled expression on his face. He was thinking of his promise to Hope, in the queer little mud hut. She had made him promise to come back for her. He had foreseen, in his temporary oblivion of all things but himself and her, no difficulties in the way of fulfilling this assurance. Now, he plainly saw it to be out of the question. Why should he, of all the party, be desirous of going? Mollie knew the place, so had need of no guide. Even Richard Forde, in his capacity as doctor, had a better right than he. And would she miss him? Would she even mark his non-appearance? Decidedly not; true, in the absence of any other familiar face, she had seemed to cling to him, but, with Mollie and Muriel to comfort her, was it likely she should even remember his existence?

Oh, better—better so ! No more danger, no more anguish, if it could be avoided. If she did by chance bestow a thought upon him, it would be that he had not kept his word ; he had promised to return, and he had not returned. So best. Let her think so of him—she would not then feel bound to torture him with thanks or gratitude. Let this be the end. Never, while he lived, would he see her face again.

‘He is as hoarse as a raven, and hasn’t a dry thread on him,’ interposed the doctor energetically. ‘Westmorland, go upstairs and change at once, if you don’t wish to have rheumatic fever—I’ll bring you something hot to drink.’

Evelyn looked meditatively down at the puddle which had collected on the tessellated paving-stones where he stood.

‘I am rather wet,’ he slowly observed. ‘Yes. I think, as—as I’m not wanted

any more, I will go upstairs and change.'

He moved towards the stairs, but, as he went, his eyes fell on Leo's sweet, sympathetic face, looking eagerly at him, with tears swimming in her eyes. He made an effort to smile at her, even while he realized that the sight of her was acutely painful—just now.

'I hope you will be no worse for your wetting,' he said, constrainedly. 'I am not fit to speak to you now, I must go and make myself respectable——'

'In bed !' cried Richard, sharply, seizing his arm and dragging him off. 'You want wringing out, like a sponge, I declare ! I never felt anything so saturated, in my life !'

Evelyn obediently went with him, and submitted to the hot bath, the energetic rubbing, and the whisky which the doctor considered necessary.

'But of course I am all right,' he said,

doggedly, 'I am pretty tough, as you know, Forde. I shall not be a penny the worse for this to-morrow,—you will see! What time do we leave here for the station?'

'I really don't think you ought to travel to-morrow.'

'I mean to, so there is no need to waste breath,' declared Evelyn, rolling his now inconveniently hot person about in the large bed. 'What a fuss to make about a trifle! I'm all right, I tell you.'

Richard stood looking down upon him, thinking what a fine fellow he was, from a physical point of view, and also how incomprehensible from the moral stand-point.

'Leo has been very anxious about you,' he remarked, after a pause.

'I am sorry to hear it,' replied his patient, blushing like a girl. 'It was most unfortunate, but unavoidable, you see. I was the only member of the party who was mounted at the time.'

‘Yes : that just made all the difference. I fancy Mr. Greville would have given something to be in your saddle.’

‘Greville?’

‘Yes ; a good fellow I should say. Miss Merrion could hardly do better.’

Evelyn lay silent, his arms raised, his hands joined under his head.

‘Oh—is that it?’ he said at last.

‘Obvious enough, surely?’

‘Oh, yes—I suppose so.’

‘Because you are so unimpressionable, it does not follow that other people have no eyes,’ laughed Richard. ‘Miss Merrion is more than attractive, she is bewitching ; they say she has countless victims. I only wonder that you have not succumbed ; that Leo should have conquered when she was by, is an additional source of elation to me, I assure you.’

Evelyn set his teeth and closed his eyes.

The doctor had very unconsciously administered a tonic which began to work almost instantaneously.

After he was left alone, the Major repeated those words over and over again,

'They say she has countless victims.'

And one of these was Evelyn Westmorland, who, of all men, had best been armed against her fascinations. In the teeth of all that he knew from Disney, he had allowed this madness to overtake him. She had jilted his friend—that was the charge against her: which charge she had admitted. No new facts had transpired; there was no reason why he should think better of her now than before. And yet——

He thought of the small sad face, the sweet lips so bravely set together, of the way in which she had shrunk from him, of the voice which had cried, *'I hate you!'* Had her conduct, from their first meeting,

been that of a designing woman? He thought not.

‘ You fool,’ he muttered, ‘ what do you know of women ?’

But still he felt, still he owned to himself, in his exceeding truthfulness, that he would give everything but honour to hold her once, only once, in his proud arms—to have her eyes meet his once, only once, with a love that answered his own—to feel her damask cheek pressed against his sun-burnt one, to clasp her close—closer—— Ah, God! it was delirium. He was only a unit among *countless victims*—let him remember that; and, meanwhile, there was consolation in the fact that no one knew of his madness. No one knew, nor ever should; he had been preserved—miraculously, as it seemed to him—from the sin of telling her. Had his trial lasted much longer, he confessed that it might have been otherwise.

So he lay tossing and struggling and very miserable in his mental disquiet, till he heard the rumbling of wheels under his window. They were bringing her home. He sat up, listening. The sounds rose but faintly from the hall below. What were they all doing? What an ass he felt, he unamiably told himself, to be put to bed like a tired baby; and it was only a quarter-past ten. He had a mind to get up and go downstairs. No! At whatever cost, he would *not* see her again.

He flung himself down among his pillows. Eagerly he strained his ears for fresh sounds, but his room was a long way from the stairs, and he could distinguish nothing clearly. He lay very still, to catch the lightest footfall, but an oppressive silence reigned around, and he could not understand it. And suddenly he was no longer in bed—what could have made him think so?—he was leading a horse through

the tangles of the wood, and the night was very dark. Leo sat on the horse, and she plaintively cried to him to take her home.

‘I never would have engaged myself to you, if I had known you would be so unkind,’ she sobbed; and he could not comfort her, though he promised to take her home as soon as they had found Hope.

‘We must find her, you know—must find her,’ he whispered. ‘Near here there was a break in the trees—a charcoal-burner’s hut; she is there, waiting for me. I promised to come and fetch her.’

And now the strange, furze-thatched huts were before him, but dark; all was dark within, and he beat against the door. What became of Leo and the horse he could not tell; but a sweet-faced woman stood before him, and said, ‘Hush! she is asleep; you must not awaken her.’

‘Let me in—let me in!’ he cried, unheeding; and she softly asked,

‘Can you be hard and bitter on such a night as this, so full of stars?’

Frantically he set himself to climb the furze thatch, so as to reach his love through the window; and, as he climbed, the wall stretched up higher and higher, he grew no nearer to the top for all his striving. The rain beat down upon him, the darkness was impenetrable, and he trembled, panting with his terrible efforts. At last he reached a little window, high and remote, and, clinging to the window-sill, looked through.

A white shaft of moonlight streamed down an immeasurable distance, lighting up a cathedral aisle, and the narrow bed on which Hope lay, white and still. Upon her they had placed her anchor, wreathed in flowers: her little pale hands were folded over it.

‘Hush!’ said some one, ‘come away; they are going to shut up the coffin.’

‘Not till I have said good-bye to her,’ he cried aloud; ‘I tell you I will and must say good-bye to her first!’

He sprang in, and felt himself falling, falling through an endless depth: when in his agonized ears there rang the sound of the hammer striking blows on Hope’s coffin: and with a hoarse, wild, desperate cry he leaped from his bed, and found himself standing on the floor, a cold sweat bursting out on his skin, his knees knocking under him.

At the same instant Forde entered.

‘Did I startle you? I did not know you were asleep,’ he said. ‘What a yell you gave! Were you enjoying a nightmare?’

‘Ye-es,’ gasped Evelyn, sinking upon the bed. ‘What is it? What has happened?’

‘I only looked in for a moment on my way to bed; I thought you might be glad

to know that Miss Merrion is quite wonderfully well—in fact, she is almost unhurt, and the charcoal-burner's wife seems to be emphatically a trump.'

CHAPTER XIII.

A DISCARDED LOVER.

Entre deux êtres aussi complexes et aussi divers que l'homme et la femme, ce n'est pas trop de toute la vie pour se bien connaître et s'aimer dignement.

COMTE'S *Philosophy*.

THE cold weather which followed the thunderstorm seemed to change everything. The heavens were grey, the air chill, the first frost of the season had nipped the gay flowers in the gardens.

Captain Edgar Disney anathematized all northern climates with the true fervour of the Briton lately returned from the tropics, as he stood on the draughty plat-

form of Norchester station, awaiting, with much impatience, the arrival of the Doncaster train, with his horses and groom.

They are very amusing studies, these Anglo-Indians. You go to call upon one of them who is in England on furlough some lovely day in the beginning of summer. The weather is so genial, you are revelling in it, blooming, expanding in the welcome warmth. You find the Anglo-Indian sitting in a darkened room, on the cool side of the house, ice-water bandage on his brow, iced drinks at his side; the page-boy, with scarlet countenance, is lustily agitating two large fans, designed to remind the sufferer of a punkah: an enormous white umbrella, and a bark helmet with a puggeree lie on the ground.

‘Execrable climate!’ pants the victim, ‘far hotter than I ever felt in Calcutta! Suicide to go about in the broiling sun as you fools of English do! No arrange-

ments in any of the houses for summer heat! You ought to have sun-blinds to every window; marble bath-rooms; verandahs; take a siesta!' 'Do you call to-day hot?' you ask, in mild surprise. 'Hot, sir!' cries the outraged one, 'I never felt so hot in India—never!'

To said India, next year, he duly returns; and, in his first letter to you, you observe these words:

'Of course the heat here is perfectly grilling—you English can form no idea of it! I never felt thoroughly warm once all the time I was in England: no proper conveniences for heating your houses; no system for warming halls or passages! Execrable climate!'

You spend fifteen minutes in a praiseworthy endeavour to systematize the climatic views of your friend, and then you give it up; reflecting that, after all, when the English invented umbrellas and mack-

intoshes, they did about all they could towards making things pleasanter in this watery isle. And, spite of the good advice you have received, on the forthcoming four-and-a-half hot days of summer, you neither darken your house nor sit in the cellar, but go out and allow the coy English sunshine to renew your youth, and the enterprising midge to embellish your person, as you drink tea under the copper beech on the lawn.

Disney was in a rare mood to find fault. He had left London a few days back, finding its closeness insupportable, its emptiness intolerable. Taking advantage of the very cordially-worded invitation which his friend Forde had dashed off to him in the first impulse of his sympathy, he had promptly started to Norchester, hoping there to find fine weather and a hospitable reception. Neither was forthcoming. Forde

was away, and, the very day after his arrival, down came the rain in torrents, breaking up all the heat, leaving the world chilly, wind-swept, and grey.

Eminently sociable, and devoutly hating his own company, he had established himself at the 'Swan Inn' in the market-place, and killed time with much difficulty, many cigars, and a sporting novel, until it was time to go up to the station and get his horses. He had no definite idea as to when Forde would return: some time that day, he believed; but telegrams are not explicit, and the cordial letter with which Richard had supplemented his, had not come to hand, because it was addressed to Minster-gate, where he believed his friend to have taken up his quarters. Disney determined to call at Forde's on his way down, and find out what time he was expected. Meantime, he walked up and

down briskly to keep himself warm, and, in true British fashion, roundly abused the unpunctuality of the trains to the servants of the company.

These all listened with much deference and sympathy : they knew a cavalry officer when they saw one ; and, in truth, the Captain's outward man was sure to enlist affection and admiration wherever he went. He was rather tall—certainly slim, but compactly built, with a head that would not have disgraced a Praxiteles, covered with sunny, closely-clipped hair, full of ripples and ridges which would have developed into curls had the barber permitted. He was very sunburnt, and this made his large, clear blue eyes more noticeable ; his nose was straight, and his long, golden moustache might have made the most humble of men vain. No suspicion of vanity lurked, however, in the frank, winning eyes and smile. It was a

very irresistible face, and, even now that he was confessedly out of humour, there was something about him which made everyone look twice at him, and feel the better for any sight so goodly and pleasant.

The leisurely train steamed at last casually into the station, as if conscious of having the whole day before it; and Disney hastened in the direction of the horse-boxes.

It was a great relief to find that the mare had behaved with exemplary fortitude, and soothing to see the delight with which she rubbed her loving nose against his coat-sleeve. His cart was there too, and every porter in the station hastened to give a helping hand.

‘Not such bad time as I feared, sir, neither,’ said Joe, the groom, the Captain’s devoted bond-slave and adorer.

Disney turned his head to look at the

station-clock, and saw a sight which arrested his eyes at once : and for a moment he forgot his mare, his cart, everything which had been previously paramount.

A girl stood on the platform, alone. Her face was turned partially away from him, he only saw the outline of a smooth cheek, and coils of dark brown hair ; but her figure was drawn out clearly against the cloudy sky beyond, and his quick eye noted and appreciated at once its indescribable careless grace. She wore a very simple dark blue travelling dress, and in her hand was a bunch of magnificent late roses, whose opulent colour seemed a centre of warmth and light in the dreary landscape. The point of one irreproachable boot was just visible beneath the severely simple skirt.

As if the gazer's earnest scrutiny had some magnetic attraction, she turned and looked at him ; and, as her absent glance

rested upon him, it quickened into aroused attention. Her eyes were glorious, he told himself in real admiration. All the glamour, the unutterable attractiveness of youth and splendid health were here. After a moment of looking straight at him, the girl withdrew her eyes, and seemed searching for someone, for she threw an impatient glance around her. Just as Disney was wondering whether he dare offer any help, or whether he had better send a porter to her assistance, a gentleman was seen, moving up the platform quickly, a bag in hand, a wrap over his arm.

‘Here it is,’ he was saying, reassuringly; and Disney with a great start, flinging away his cigar-end, came forward, crying eagerly,

‘By all that’s utterly unaccountable, Westmorland, where did you spring from?’

If he had started, his start was nothing

to the Major's, though of course Evelyn should have been more or less prepared for the meeting, knowing Disney to be in Norchester.

He displayed a countenance in which appeared the strangest—apparently, the most uncalled-for emotions, a passion of sympathy, struggling with a sense of conscious guilt; the first thing, however, which struck his friend was his appearance of illness, his haggard face, wan under its sunburn, the purple rings under his great grave eyes.

‘I am pleased, more pleased than I can say, to meet you, old man,’ he cried. ‘I have been literally yearning for the sight of a friendly face! But I must say you don’t look over brilliant: right down ill, I should say! What on earth have you been doing to yourself?’

Evelyn was dumb; perhaps surprise kept him silent. This radiant, dashing,

jovial Edgar Disney was to his mind as little like a forsaken lover as he himself, in the Captain's eyes, probably resembled an accepted one.

But Leo came to the rescue. She raised her limpid eyes to Disney's, full of a charming comprehension.

'I think—I am sure you must be my brother's friend,' said she, hospitably extending her hand to him. 'Did you come to meet us? How kind of you!'

'Miss Forde,' the Major found himself able to murmur explanatorily at this point.

'Miss Forde!' cried the delighted Disney, clasping the little hand. 'Are you really Dick Forde's sister? I am, indeed——' 'in luck's way,' was on the tip of his tongue, but, on reflection, he thought it better to leave the sentence an eloquent fragment; and, before more could be said, Dick himself appeared on the scenes, his mission

having been to charter a fly and see the luggage piled thereon.

‘Hallo! there you are!’ was his greeting, most wanting as to words, most cordial in tone, and there was a hearty hand-shaking. ‘We hurried home on your account; delighted to see you looking so fit! Westmorland, have you introduced my sister?’

‘I guessed who it was,’ said Leo, with a pretty assumption of dignity which had come into being during the last three days, ‘so I partly introduced myself. I have heard so much of Captain Disney.’

‘Nothing bad, I hope?’ he cried, laughing light-heartedly.

‘Nothing in the least bad, I assure you.’

‘I wonder at that! My misdemeanours are so manifold I could hardly have thought it possible that anyone could talk much of

me without mentioning them ! But Forde is charitable !

‘It’s a great relief to find you in such capital form,’ said Forde, smiling. ‘Westmorland told me very dismal stories about you.’

‘Did he ?’ said the young man, with a quick glance at Evelyn, ‘he ought to be ashamed of himself, and I think he must have been speaking of himself and not me at the time. Did you ever see a man look more seedy ? What has he been doing ?’

‘Oh, he had quite an adventure yesterday,’ said Forde, ‘and it is folly for him to be out to-day. I expect he will be laid up.’

‘An adventure, eh, Westmorland ?’ said Disney, easily.

‘Caught in the thunderstorm yesterday, at the top of Limmerdale, with a lady,’ laughed Richard. ‘Her horse bolted, and

threw her ; he didn't know the country in the least, and had to get her home somehow.'

'I hope,' said Disney, gravely, 'that she was young and pretty, I wouldn't have poor Westmorland grow rheumatic for the sake of a plain woman.'

The look of dumb agony in Westmorland's eyes was strange to see ; it was as though the light words had hurt him physically—he scarcely heard Leo's eager, loyal cry of :

'She is beautiful ! the loveliest girl I know !'

He set his teeth together, and said nothing. Even Disney, though of course failing utterly to understand, gathered generally that on this point he was mutely implored to restrain his wit, and, with his usual quickness, turned the subject instantly, by lamenting that the Fordes

should have hurried back to Norchester on his account.

Leo hoped that Martha had made him comfortable, which elicited the fact of his being at the 'Swan,' and he was vehemently bidden to repair at once thither, and bring over his things, an invitation which he was but too ready to accept. How different a world it was, from what it had seemed an hour ago ! Leo's girlish beauty had infused summer into his skies with a glance.

He explained that his errand to the station had really been to receive his horse and his groom. The cart was duly exhibited and admired, also the pretty black mare, which Joe was already placing between the shafts.

'May I drive one of you down?' he asked Richard.

'Thanks, but I think Leo must come

with me, and Westmorland takes leave of us here ; he goes up to Hesselburgh, where his father is staying.'

'Oh—is that it?' said Disney, looking from one to the other in a rather puzzled way.

He felt that he did not quite understand the situation. Dick's manner was hurried, and he seemed to be labouring under a suppressed excitement ; and, as for Westmorland, his perturbation could not have escaped the notice of the most casual observer. What did it mean?

He felt Evelyn's hand on his shoulder.

'I suppose you don't feel like giving me a lift towards Hesselburgh?' he asked, in a voice which plainly said, 'I have something to say to you.'

After a moment's reflection, Disney answered,

'I shall be very glad.'

It was contrary to his nature to leave

the side of any pretty woman, but there was the enchanting prospect before him of a week or more to be spent in the same house with the beautiful Miss Forde ; and, besides, he might get some explanations out of Westmorland, for really the attitude of the two men was suggestive of something out of the usual way.

CHAPTER XIV.

I AM AFRAID YOU MISJUDGED HER.

Oh, heart of mine, marked broad with her mark,
Tekel, found wanting, set aside !

. . . See, I bleed these tears in the dark . . .

If it would only come over again !

ROBERT BROWNING.

‘GOOD-BYE, for a very short time,’ said Major Westmorland, in a low voice to Leo, as he helped her into the station fly. ‘I shall in all probability bring my father to see you this afternoon.’

Leo trembled, turned scarlet, then pale, and lifted beseeching eyes to him.

‘Oh—I am so frightened!’ she said, plaintively.

‘I have assured you that there is no need ; he will be overjoyed,’ he answered, kindly, taking her shy hand encouragingly, but she searched his eyes in vain for the look of tender mutual understanding which makes one of the most exquisite delights of love ; again the forlorn sensation of something wanting crept coldly over her, but her experience was so slight that she was but too ready to believe herself foolish, unreasonable, longing for impossibilities.

He stood back, watching her drive away with her brother, and, as soon as they were out of earshot, Disney’s eager voice broke on his ear.

‘Well ! Never be surprised at anything you see. To think of Forde’s possessing a sister of that description ! Forde, of all men ! Real good sort, but plain and steady-going—hey ? Shouldn’t you say so ?’ Standing on the station steps, he lit himself a fresh cigar, and the match-light

flickered over his exhilarated face. 'That girl, I tell you,' he cried, 'that girl has points that ought to win her first prize in any beauty-show where the judges knew anything about it. Of course she is a bit young, too thin, and so on, but in a couple of years I'm hanged if you will be able to pick any hole in her anywhere; she is a beauty.'

Evelyn looked at him in an astonishment so great as to engulf even his resentment; instead of objecting, as he naturally might, to having his *fiancée* discussed and admired from this exceedingly technical point of view, he said, after a speechless pause,

'You carry it off very well, Disney, but you needn't put it on with me, you know. I can sympathise with you.'

'Eh?' said the Captain, in surprise almost as great, surveying him as he

got into the cart. 'What's the matter now?'

He gathered up the reins and made fast the neat apron to the strap in the middle.

'Up with you, Westmorland, and let's get things explained a bit. Let her go, Joe, and you be off to the "Swan" in the market-place, get your dinner, and engage the stable for a fortnight certain—d'ye hear?'

Joe touched his shining hat with military smartness, and in a minute the cart was spinning up the green lane which led to Hesselburgh, and then Edgar turned his beautiful eyes on his companion, and said blythely,

'Now then, what's up?'

'Disney,' said the Major, 'I feel as if I—as if I hardly understood you. I expected to see you regularly cut up.'

‘What! Has anything happened?’ cried the other, quickly, ‘because, if so, I wish you would speak out. I can’t stand this sort of thing, you know.’

The Major mused for a moment, and then said slowly,

‘When I last heard from you—not much more than six months ago—you said you were heart-broken.’

‘O—o—oh!’ softly cried Edgar, and was silent, while a shadow gathered darkly over his bright face, and a pained look passed into his eyes. So marked was the change, that sympathy and remorse for having touched such a painful chord leapt simultaneously into Evelyn’s heart, and involuntarily he half stretched out his hand, then drew it back.

‘Heart-broken,’ resumed the driver, after a long silence, ‘well, I believe I was, for a time. I have never been so hard hit, certainly.’ He flicked the flies from the

mare's head with the whip, and an absent look was in his eyes, as though his thoughts were travelling back into the past. 'That *was* a fascinating girl, Westmorland,' he said, with a long sigh.

Evelyn cleared his throat, in which a lump seemed to have risen.

'I must tell you, that I,' he began, with his usual tardiness of utterance; but Disney interrupted him.

'I would have sworn black was white, had she asked me,' he said, bitterly. 'I was mad about her; but you know—you know these things are not incurable, whatever novelists may say on the subject.'

Evelyn was moved to indignation.

'You seemed to think you were incurable at the time, judging from your letters to me on the subject,' he said, his heart beating excitedly, his breath coming quickly.

'Ah, well! Such a cool old hand as

you are, my boy, knew how to make allowances for what a fellow felt obliged to dash off in the heat of the moment.'

'Disney!'

'Well—take an analogy,' said Disney, coolly. 'You were wounded in action, were you not, in the Murrepore insurrection? What can a man do, when the ball is in him, but writhe and curse his fate? Didn't you feel as if you would be glad to die and be out of your misery? As if it was too much to bear, for the time? But what happens? They get the ball out, and by-and-by you come to feel some sort of satisfaction in being alive again, to take an interest in things, to go about and gradually to think less of your wound. You have got an ugly scar to carry about with you to your grave; but it does not materially affect your comfort, or your pleasure.'

‘They get out the ball,’ said Westmorland, in a low, choked tone. ‘But suppose they can’t do that? Some balls go too deep.’

Disney did not immediately reply, but drove on, turning the subject over in his mind. At last,

‘I should have a thorough contempt for a man who could allow such a thing to spoil his life,’ he declared, firmly.

‘Oh—certainly—I suppose so,’ was the Major’s mystified reply.

‘What care I, though fair she be, if she be not fair for me?’ laughed his friend. ‘She couldn’t have cared for me deeply, you know, or she would not have turned me over; and, you see, I’m such a faulty fellow, the woman who loves me must take me, faults and all. Her love must be great enough to overlook them.’

Again he considered.

‘Of course I know she thought she was doing right when she broke it off,’ he began, hesitatingly.

His beautiful eyes kindled and his colour rose as he made the admission. Evelyn looked at him with an indescribable mixture of feeling. His agitation was so great, he could scarcely control it. He had judged this man by his own standard—by his own loyal, but utterly exceptional ideal of constancy; he had been guilty of the inconceivable folly of imputing to Edgar Disney the principles which would have actuated Evelyn Westmorland. It had been quite inevitable; it is the mistake made by everyone in this game of cross-purposes which we call life; but singularly disastrous had its effects been in this case.

‘Don’t you see,’ he said, hoarsely, with feverish earnestness, ‘that, if that is so, she may have cared for you all the time? I mean this. If she really, as you say, be-

lieved it right to give you up, she would do it, however great the love she bore. She would do it on principle.'

Disney laughed a low, melodious laugh of scepticism.

'Oh! I don't believe in that, you know—not when people are in love,' he answered. 'A woman in love doesn't get time to think of such out-of-the-way, inflated sentiment——'

'Sentiment! It's a question of right and wrong,' growled the Major.

'You don't quite understand. I suppose I had better give you the *casus belli*. It was——' he hesitated again. 'I tell you this in confidence, Westmorland, because you are good enough to take, as it seems, a lively interest in my affairs and morals. It was a garrison flirtation, and I am free to confess that I behaved pretty badly. It was all stopped, of course, directly *she* appeared on the scenes; but the girl was a

—a simple-minded girl, and she thought I meant more than I did. I believe she took it terribly to heart, and it all came—somebody told—well, the ins and outs of it would be a long story, but the result was that—er—Miss Merrion came to know *her*, and to know all about it; so she sent for me, and asked me if it was true.’

‘Yes?’ was Evelyn’s breathless question.

He felt as if he could see Hope at the moment—as if he knew the expression of her eyes and mouth and chin.

‘Ah, well! I couldn’t deny much of it,’ heavily replied Disney. ‘I hadn’t realized it—hadn’t expected she could think of it so seriously as to form a barrier. When she—dismissed me, I could not believe my ears.’

Evelyn closed his eyes.

‘She considered me bound in honour to this girl,’ went on Edgar. ‘She was right, theoretically; I can own that now, though

then I was feeling too much about it to be able to see any side but my own, and I still think she laid too much stress upon it. As I said, women in love don't act theoretically.'

The light rattle of the wheels in the sandy lane was the only sound for a while ; then he resumed,

'I suppose these things happen for the best, you know. It might have been rather a bore, after all, to have your wife sitting in judgment on you from such an altitude. She said she despised me, and that no happiness could come of marrying a man she despised ; and I expect she was right about that. She made so much out of it : what had I done ? Only what any fellow does, times and again. She was a governess—this other ; impossible, you know : pretty, but dull : one grew tired of her. Now one would never, during a hundred years, tire of Miss Merrion. Jove ! I wish you could

have seen her, Westmorland ! The sort of woman to twist herself in and out your heart-strings, and make you feel—pshaw ! What's the use of trying to describe her, after all ?'

Evelyn struggled with that strange impediment in his throat, and brought out his confession in a grating voice unlike his own.

'I have seen her,' he said.

'Seen whom?' asked Disney, with listless inattention.

'Miss Merrion,' faltered the other ; and then their eyes met.

'You have seen her,' meditatively repeated Disney, as if retracing in his mind all that he had said of her during the foregoing conversation. 'Where?'

'She is staying here—at Hesselburgh.'

His companion pulled the mare up short, and turned on him with a heightened colour and agitated manner which proved

him to be perhaps less perfectly recovered than he had imagined.

‘Is she there now?’

‘Oh, no! At Leaming—we left her there. It was she who was thrown from her horse, yesterday.’

‘Ah!’

There was indeed food for reflection here on the part of both men. Westmorland was still reeling under the shock of discovering that Disney treated his recent love affair as an episode—painful and memorable indeed, but still an episode: and handled it with a certain impartiality which seemed to relegate it to the remote past, and so upset every notion he had formed about it. The character of Disney’s meditations was partly revealed by his first question.

‘Does she know that you know me?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t want to meet her, Westmorland.’

‘Not?’ said Evelyn, faintly, wondering if such a desire were possible on the part of a man once admitted for a time to the Paradise of Hope Merrion’s love.

‘Of course not—it would be pretty awkward for both of us,’ said Edgar, sharply. ‘What do you think of her—eh?’

‘I—have seen very little of her,’ faltered the Major. ‘Your letters had given me an entirely false view of the case; I imagined that she was a . . . that she had treated you badly . . . and I kept my distance.’

‘You *are* a good old sort, Westmorland! Something like a friend!’ laughed Disney, with affectionate gratitude, ‘but your zeal was a trifle misdirected. I am afraid you misjudged her.’

‘I did,’ replied the Major, aloud; and in his sore, desolate heart he cried, ‘God forgive me!’

‘She—I hope—she was not hurt, yesterday?’ hesitatingly asked Edgar.

‘I hope not—I believe not. They said she seemed to be pretty well this morning. Of course I did not see her before coming away.’

‘What made you come away?’

‘I came to tell my father my news’—a pause, and then, in his deepest tones, he continued, ‘I am engaged to be married to Miss Forde.’

‘You know, Westmorland, you never were any hand at greening; drop it, that wouldn’t deceive a baby.’

‘I don’t want to deceive anybody; I am engaged to Miss Forde, and I wonder you should think me capable of joking on such a subject,’ was the prompt and stern reply.

‘Why on earth,’ cried Disney, ‘couldn’t you say so before? Are you crazy? Allowing me to discuss her in that way, and to criticize her points! I never came across such a fellow in my life! Engaged—you—to Miss Forde! Well!’

Evelyn had no answer to give : he could hardly say that his thoughts had been so full of the woman he loved that he had scarcely so much as heard what was said of the girl he was engaged to.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WOMEN'S SANITARY LEAGUE.

Child of an age which lectures, not creates.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

‘THE programmes are my great difficulty,’ said Mrs. Saxon, perplexedly. ‘I wish Muriel were at home. I was counting upon Mr. Westmorland to draw them up, but evidently he is not well enough to be troubled about anything.’

‘What do you suppose is the matter with him?’ Athelstan asked her, anxiously.

‘He is fretting himself ill because the

Major won't marry. I have an idea that he hoped something might ensue from this visit to Leaming, for he seemed in such spirits when they all started, and was such a help to me over all these W. S. L. preparations: but that note I had from his son this morning, saying that he was coming back to-day, seems to have cast him down most terribly. I fancy he thinks he has been rejected by one or more of the three.'

'Not likely—eh?'

'How can I tell? The unexpected always happens, you know. But this does not settle the question of the programmes, and I shall have Miss Dinwiddie here this afternoon.'

The poor lady's blotched and heated countenance did not improve her appearance. She wore a fawn-coloured cloth suit, and a deer-stalker to match, in some-

what painful proximity to her brick-coloured brow. She and her husband stood just before the front door of Hesselburgh, and watched the erection of a huge red-and-white-striped marquee on the lawn. There was an air of bustle everywhere—gardeners were busy with mowing machines and rollers, some of the stablemen and boys had been pressed into the service to trim borders, and nip dead geranium-blooms. The grey skies and cold wind took the heart out of things in general, and made the preparations seem dreary and futile.

At a little distance from Mrs. Saxon stood a lady of uncertain age—thin, sandy-haired, and spectacled. She was clad in scanty, lank garments, which conveyed the impression of being insecurely fastened at the neck and waist. She held a notebook and pencil, and was apparently jot-

ting down a description of the house and grounds, for she frequently glanced up and around.

‘I think that will be all, thank you,’ said she, presently, approaching and speaking in a voice and manner which Mrs. Saxon would have characterised as hopelessly affected had she been a well-dressed, fashionable-looking woman. ‘How soon do you expect Miss Dinwiddie?’

‘Shortly: she will be here as soon as the Richester train gets in. If you have really done, you must come and have some lunch, Miss Sharpley.’

‘Oh, how very kind you are, dear Mrs. Saxon! The W. S. L. ought indeed to be grateful to you.’

‘I hope it is; at all events, it shows itself so by accepting my invitation to parade itself in my grounds. May we have a better day than this, that’s all! Athelstan,

take Miss Sharpley and give her some lunch.'

'Indeed, yes, my dear ! This way, Miss Sharpley,' cried the zealous *aide-de-camp*.

'You would like to stay and see Miss Dinwiddie?' called Mrs. Saxon, after them.

'If you please, dear Mrs. Saxon.'

The hostess folded her arms, stared at the rising marquee, and fell into a reverie, from which she was aroused by the sound of footsteps behind her, and, looking up, saw Mr. Westmorland feebly advancing down the hall.

'Ah, my friend, are you better?' she said, kindly. 'I am taking a minute's breathing-time, and looking out for our secretary.'

'Miss Dinwiddie? Ah ! it will be pleasant to meet her again. She, as well as your special reporter in there, are out-

comes of the age we live in—an article for which there was no call in the market thirty years ago; I wonder how long the demand will last?’

‘What, the demand for intelligent women?’ smiled Mrs. Saxon. ‘Not very long, I fear; only as long as there are intelligent men.’

Mr. Westmorland laughed quietly.

‘What makes intelligence take that particular form, I wonder?’ he said.

‘Which form?’

‘The form of Miss Sharpley.’

‘All clever women are not like her.’

‘Granted; but, do you know, in confidence I will own to you that I shall be glad when the day comes when women are intelligent as a matter of course, and do not make a vocation of it.’

‘I always did think you only half-converted,’ said she; ‘but, apart altogether from the suffrage, any sane person must

agree in the absolute necessity of this Women's Sanitary League. Take the most domestic view of women—take Goethe's view of them as the useful, economical, uncomplaining, unpaid servants of men, and there is all the more need for them to be sanitary. I believe the bishop is going to make a point of that. A knowledge of the laws of health and cleanliness is as essential to an under-housemaid as to a Girton graduate.'

'So you have really got the bishop to preside?'

'Both days. Dr. Compton, of the London Health League, is to speak afterwards, then Sister Mary Eleanor, from the Cricklewood Fever Hospital, then Mrs. Nash, who inspects laundries, and Miss Burton, who inspects women's workshops in Richester. In that long white tent a model hospital ward is to be fitted up, with nurses in uniform, and various members of our Sun-

day-schools as patients. In the further one is the model laundry, and beyond the model kitchen. In the large drawing-room an exhibition of sanitary clothing and bed-clothing. If we could only be sure of fine weather.'

'My dear madam, it is bound to be a success, whatever the weather. All your *objets d'art* are under cover. Your energy is beyond all praise; you deserve that the whole of Norchester should at once form itself into one gigantic health organization.'

'As you know, it is with the idea of starting a branch in Norchester like that at Richester, that I am making this experiment. The bishop is a great ally, he will draw crowds; with the late bishop it would have been hopeless, as he belonged to that once numerous school of theology which thought famine, pestilence, and disease the will of God, and that it was wicked to try to prevent them.'

‘Many traces of that creed still linger in various forms,’ said Mr. Westmorland, ‘it’s not obsolete.’

‘Then,’ proceeded the lady, ‘there is your paper, to which I am looking forward more than anything, but for which I have not found a name: about not forgetting beauty in the search for health.’

‘I shall be bashful before so many authorities.’

‘Oh, nonsense! And Canon Shorthouse will read a short paper on the system of the Roman baths lately discovered in Norchester. And now I have only two days in which to get the programmes printed, and I do so want your advice. I have telegraphed to Muriel that she must really come home from Leaming at once.’

Mr. Westmorland’s brows darkened as he heard the mention of Leaming.

‘The attractions there seem to be great, to everybody but Evelyn,’ he sneered.

‘What on earth is he leaving for, I should like to know.’

‘I daresay he finds it dull,’ calmly said Mrs. Saxon. ‘The life there would not suit everyone, and he is a soldier, and used to action.’

Evelyn’s father made a gesture of ineffable disdain.

‘Dull! With those three lovely girls! He is not a man at all, if he thinks so.’

‘You are hard upon him.’

‘I have before told you that my son is a great disappointment to me.’

‘And I will not hear a word against him. I consider him a model son.’

‘If he were a man of great talent, one might pardon his eccentricity,’ said the parent, drily. ‘But he!—I suppose he has forgotten all he ever learnt, and that it would be an effort to him to translate a page of Homer! Never opens the classics, that I know of.’

‘He is an excellent tactician,’ retorted Evelyn’s defender, valiantly, ‘for the General told me so. He said, “Westmorland might not have the originality to plan a campaign, but he has got the sense and the pluck, the coolness and the daring, to carry it out!”’

‘Why didn’t he stick to it then?’ testily asked the invalid.

‘Why, it was your doing! He gave it up to be with you!’ cried Mrs. Saxon. ‘His love for you was stronger than his ambition.’

‘Love for me? He has none! I repeat none! He does not consider me in the least; neither had he a spark of ambition; he was simply glad to catch at a suggestion to come home and be idle. I asked him about it at the time. I said to him, “Now, don’t go sacrificing yourself for me; have you any feeling of reluctance? Do

you care?" and I well remember his answer. "I don't care a straw," said he. "I don't care a straw." That man ambitious! No indeed!

Mrs. Saxon was silent.

'He is unfeeling, that's what it is,' went on the father, crossly, 'and it seems to me hard, as I said to you some few weeks back, that my only one should be such a clod. However, I seem to suffer in common with all other modern fathers; no more control over our sons than if they were not related to us. It is hard, but you tell me it is salutary, and I suppose it is. To have every hope blighted in this world, is more likely to turn our thoughts towards the next.'

He spoke with an air of patient resignation, and looked very handsome and exceedingly ill-used as he stood against the porch. He shivered in the bleak air.

'I am afraid I must go in,' he said pre-

sently, finding she did not answer his pious lament.

‘The brougham—Miss Dinwiddie—I must wait to receive her,’ said Mrs. Saxon, eagerly, as the carriage came in sight ; and for a moment he forgot his grievance, and his face lit up with an amused smile.

‘I must wait and see her, she is always worth looking at,’ he murmured.

The prospectuses of the Women's Sanitary League bore as the name and degree of their chief secretary,

Miss Christina Dinwiddie,
formerly Matron of the Slate Street Hospital.

This certainly conveyed an impression of age and dignity. What Miss Dinwiddie's age really was, is a question not to be too deeply probed ; but her appearance was most undoubtedly that of youth. She had a rather pretty face, and a perennial smile which was somewhat too sug-

gestive of a cat. An aureole of curly auburn hair waved above her brow, and framing this, at the back of her head, was a huge brown velvet hat with a quantity of brown and yellow feathers. She was wrapped in a long brown cloak, which showed its yellow lining here and there.

‘Dear Mrs. Saxon!’ cried she, ‘how good of you to send to meet me!’

‘I could hardly expect you to carry your luggage three miles,’ replied her hostess, in her uncompromising way.

‘And Mr. Westmorland!’ cried the secretary, holding up her hands. ‘I declare,’ coquettishly, ‘that you will frighten the life out of me when I am on the platform, Mr. Westmorland! I shall be so afraid of your criticisms.’

‘I never criticize ladies, Miss Dinwiddie, especially when they are handsome.’

This was a very different type of compliment from that which he would have

offered to Hope Merrion, but the event proved that he knew how to please.

The lady blushed and sparkled, and cried 'Oh!' as if she were fresh from a second-rate boarding school. Mrs. Saxon smiled oddly.

'Well! we have indeed a friend in you,' pursued Miss Dinwiddie gushingly, as she looked around. 'What an event this will be! The whole north is talking about it! There will be columns and sketches innumerable in the *Englishwoman*!'

'Miss Sharpley is here now.'

'*In-deed!* But I thought she only drew the large centre pictures?'

'Exactly. The large centre picture is to represent the platform, with portraits of us all. She has drawn Mr. Westmorland and me, and now she wants a sitting from you, I believe. Wait,' she added to the coachman, 'I shall want you to drive me to the Palace presently.'

‘A picture of me in the *Englishwoman*!’ cried Miss Dinwiddie.

‘Surely not the first time?’ humorously said Mr. Westmorland.

‘Well! It’s the first time I have been on the centre page,’ admitted she, all blushes.

‘There is to be a sheet of sketches, of the hospital, laundry, &c.,’ said Mrs. Saxon.

‘All England will be ringing with your name, Miss Dinwiddie,’ protested Mr. Westmorland, as they all three went indoors together.

The indefinite Miss Sharpley was found in the dining-room, sketch-book in hand, her scarcely tasted lunch beside her, rapidly making a telling little sketch of the pretty oriel window, and Mr. Saxon’s amiable person in front of it.

‘Dear, how clever!’ cried Miss Dinwiddie, ‘and how delightful,’ she added, conde-

scendingly, as she sat down, 'to be able to get up so much enthusiasm in the provinces.'

Mrs. Saxon indulged in a secret smile ; this lady was, as her friend had said, a creation of her age. But she reflected what a good, solid, working basis lay under this appearance and manner, what an admirable secretary she was, how untiring, how accurate, and how much the league owed its welfare to her efforts. As for her dress, why, society has long held that anybody may wear anything, regardless of aught but his or her own inclination, and Mrs. Saxon was the last woman to dispute such a doctrine.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



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